



A Second CHANCE

By: Kevin George

Book TWELVE of
The Comet Clement series

BOOK TWELVE

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PART TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER ONE

AUGUST 22, 2020

DAY OF COMET STRIKE...

For approximately the hundredth time during the last hour, the man checked his watch, wondering what sort of time difference there'd be between his watch and the official 'strike' time. He quickly came to the conclusion that either his watch was fast or Comet Clement was late, though he had serious doubts about the latter of those two. After all, astronomical experts around the world had tracked this thing for months – though some people had known about the comet much longer – so he doubted they *all* could've been wrong about the exact moment Clement would hit.

Maybe everyone will be wrong about the level of impact and amount of destruction, the man wondered hopefully. Maybe the Domino Deflection attempt sent the comet off course, or maybe more of Clement burned up in the atmosphere than expected.

No sooner did the man think that when he heard an explosion in the distance, a sound growing increasingly louder with every second that passed. He knew right away that the comet had caused the explosive sound. And if he'd heard the noise though Clement hit halfway across the globe, the aftereffects would likely wreak havoc everywhere on Earth – including here in America. The man could only pray he was far enough underground – that this bunker was built well enough – so he wouldn't be affected by the impending disaster.

Within seconds, he realized his prayers wouldn't be answered. It started off as a slight vibration beneath his feet, which he tried to deny with the hope it would soon stop. But that wasn't meant to be. The shaking became so severe that he had trouble keeping his balance. Although the loud *rumbling* was joined by the sound of objects crashing around the bunker – not to mention an incredibly disturbing *cracking* noise – one sound soon stood out among all others: a whining puppy. Among the growing chaos of the earthquake, the man was in such shock that he didn't realize the tiny dog frantically trying to climb up his leg. The little animal was in such fear that the

man had to pick it up; the poor thing literally shook in his arms. The man felt just as worried and afraid as the puppy, but he fought the urge to cry, strangely compelled to stay strong for the dog's sake.

"It's okay," the man whispered. Had this been any other moment, the man would've considered himself crazy for talking to a dog. "Don't worry, we'll make it through this."

The man felt better when the dog stopped whining, but the animal continued to quiver in fear, especially after a large rack of canned food crashed to the ground on the other side of the room. The man's instinct was to rush over and clean up the mess – after all, keeping order was always one of his mantras in life – but his surroundings continued to vibrate violently and he knew there'd be plenty of mess to clean up later.

If there'll even be a later...

Less than a minute after he heard the first signs of the comet, the man's fear turned to panic when the worst case scenario came to fruition: he felt dirt trickling atop his head. He looked around the large room and saw numerous cracks in the foundation, which started to leak earth. He suddenly imagined his bunker collapsing, burying him alive. He didn't think there was a worse way to die. A part of him considered rushing out of the room and through the tunnel, where he could return to the surface and take his chances. But as he stumbled across the room and looked at the tunnel, he realized that was where most of the dirt came from. He had to remind himself that this bunker hadn't been fully completed, that the tunnel probably hadn't been reinforced the same way the room had been. Despite the cracks and falling dirt, he had a better chance of surviving where he was rather than trying to go back to the surface. As long as he could see where the dirt was coming from, he could move to a safer spot in the room.

Then the lights began to flicker. The man heard more whining, but quickly realized the noise wasn't coming from the dog; it was coming from deep within his own throat. Thankfully, the flickering came to a stop around the same time the quaking did. When the man surveyed the scene, he was glad to see very little damage, only some small areas of dirt and supplies littering the floor.

“See, I told you we’d be okay,” he told the dog, which had calmed in his arms. “Actually, I expected it to be worse than that.”

But before he could put the dog down and start cleaning up, the animal tensed in his arms again, shaking harder and whining louder than before.

“It’s okay, everything’s okay,” the man said, trying to console the poor animal, though he was confused why it was getting upset again.

He soon figured out why. The quaking restarted, but this time it didn’t begin with a steady vibration and work its way to a more feverish degree; this time, the man was nearly thrown from his feet. He heard the splitting of wooden support beams, and dirt began to pour around him, large chunks of earth pelting his body. Anything that had remained standing during the first bout of quaking soon hit the floor. He stumbled to a safer part of the room, but the lights flickered so quickly that the room seemed to be illuminated by a strobe light. When the flickering stopped, it was because the lights had gone out, casting the entire bunker into total darkness.

The man’s panic was suddenly replaced with an icy calmness; he realized he wasn’t going to survive. He stood in one place, riding the quake like a massive wave, knowing the dirt falling around him would bury him alive within minutes. The end was near but the man wasn’t afraid; in fact, his most prevalent feeling was anger, anger that he’d traveled so far and endured so much to get here, just for everything to come crashing down around him – literally. He even felt angry that he couldn’t save the puppy shaking in his arms, though he’d never even owned a pet in his life and didn’t like animals.

Still, the prospect of drowning in dirt wasn’t an enviable ending. Had the man known a falling object would hit him in the head and knock him unconscious, he probably would’ve been grateful...

Although his senses came back slowly, the man felt the ground shaking long before he opened his eyes or heard the rattling of fallen objects. As he came to, the pain in his head was joined by something

else, pressure of something piled atop him. He tried to open his eyes but was stopped by something cool and moist. He suddenly remembered the comet strike and the earthquake and the flickering lights...

And the falling dirt from the collapsing foundation. He woke with a start when he realized dirt was covering – if not his entire body – at least part of his head. Thinking he might be buried alive, the man rushed to his feet, relieved to find that the entire room hadn't collapsed. Still, there wasn't a single shred of light to be seen and the ground continued to vibrate, though the shaking had subsided. Once his adrenaline wore off, the pain in his head exploded again and the man lost his balance, which was difficult to maintain since he couldn't see a thing. The floor was littered with dirt and cans and anything else not bolted to the ground before the shaking had started. He'd spent plenty of hours in this room before the comet struck, but hadn't paid as much attention to his surroundings as he should have. He flailed his arms in the darkness, searching for the couch he knew was somewhere nearby. The man had become turned around in the dark. He eventually abandoned his search, knowing he couldn't remain on his feet without becoming sick.

He plopped on the ground and promptly sat on a can, which brought a whole different pain to what he felt in his head. Despite how unlucky he'd been to this point, something positive finally happened when he leaned back and felt something soft: a cushion. The man had wandered about the room yet somehow ended up where he wanted. He climbed onto the couch and leaned back, closing his eyes tightly though his vision couldn't have gotten blacker. Though he'd never felt such pain as his head now ached, he was too distracted by the vibrating ground and *creaking* noises to focus on his agony. Oddly enough, a part of him wasn't worried anymore about the threat of dying; at least that would bring an end to his pain.

I don't care what happens to me, he thought. But suddenly, he remembered there *was* someone he cared about. He couldn't believe it took him this long to think about the puppy. He sat on the couch and felt dizzy but ignored the sensation, *whistling* for the animal.

“Come here, girl,” the man said. The man’s voice was barely discernable over other noises so he called out louder, which caused more pain in the process. “Come here, puppy, come to the couch.”

The man listened for the pitter-patter of running paws, but the dog was too small to be heard over the noise. The sickness he suddenly felt wasn’t from pain but concern; he was angry with himself for accepting the thought of death moments earlier. There was still hatred in his heart, but he converted that anger to a desire to survive, to live through this catastrophe, to one day seek revenge on the person who’d put him in this position. And if anything bad had happened to the dog, he would not be happy and God help the man who –

He hadn’t even felt the dog climb on the couch. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt it crawl up his arm and begin to lick his face. For a moment, the man was so relieved to find the puppy that he forgot his thoughts of vengeance and allowed the dog to lick him. Normally, he would’ve pushed the animal away, disgusted by the slobber now covering his face. He’d never liked animals before and still wondered what made him pull over to the side of the road a day earlier to rescue the puppy wandering the highway. After all, the final few days before the strike had been dangerously chaotic and the man had placed his own life on the line just by stopping. But it was a decision he was glad he’d made, especially now that the puppy was safely sitting next to him.

The man remained on the couch with his dog for an unknown length of time, as he heard random noises in the distance and felt vibrations undulating in intensity. A few times, the vibrations turned to full-blown shaking, and he wondered if each earthquake could spell the end for him and the bunker. But the shaking subsided every time and the sound of falling dirt always stopped. Regardless of whether he would survive this day – as well as those to come – the man was impressed by the skill with which this room had been built.

He’d expected to find an oversized basement and not a well-constructed bunker in the middle of nowhere. He had no idea how long it took to construct, but the builder obviously worked on it a long

time, obviously sweated and toiled underground for years to make it possible. The man understood the level of devotion required in undertaking such a massive project. He considered himself lucky to have the chance to live here, despite what was taken from him. Now if only the generator would restart, then his situation might actually improve...

The puppy remained by his side and occasionally licked his face. When the man wiped away the dog's saliva, his face felt wetter than expected. He'd been so wrapped up in ignoring his pain that he hadn't realized how hot his surroundings had become. The bunker had always been a bit chilly, but the room quickly passed through the warm stage to being downright hot, like an August afternoon. It didn't help that the man was also covered in dirt, which made him itchy all over. His growing discomfort helped him forget the pain in his head and it wasn't long until the temperature rose to dangerous levels. Though any movement was likely to make him feel faint, the man realized that passing out was preferable to melting so he forced himself to stand and start removing his clothes. He felt dizzy and his clothes were glued to his body with perspiration; the effort sapped nearly all of his remaining energy. By the time he was down to his boxers and dropped his clothes – which hit the floor with a wet *smack* – the man plopped back down on the couch.

Stripping down only helped the first few minutes before he became accustomed to the heat. It grew hotter by the second and wasn't long until he had to pick his feet off of the floor, which burned to touch. The puppy remained on the couch next to him, but it only had the energy to lick him once more before lying down, whining a few seconds until even *that* became too much effort. It started to pant as heavily as the man, who soon had trouble breathing because his lungs burned every time he inhaled. As if being hit in the head wasn't bad enough, the heat had made it just as difficult to think clearly. Only a single thought cycled through his mind.

I'm going to cook alive, I'm going to cook alive...

The man yawned. He felt strangely comfortable on the couch. Despite extreme heat, every muscle in his body relaxed, every inch of

his skin sank comfortably into the soft cushions. His eyes grew heavy, and he wanted nothing more than to let his lids drop so he could drift off into a long peaceful sleep. But somewhere in the back of his mind, a tiny voice warned him to stay awake, told him that if he fell asleep now he'd never wake up, urged him to stand up and move around and find something to drink as soon as possible. When he touched his forehead, it felt warm but mostly dry, apparently drained of bodily fluids, the first warning sign of severe dehydration.

"I have to stay awake," the man told his dog, which continued to lazily pant beside him. "Neither of us will make it unless we drink something."

He clumsily petted the dog's head. When the animal licked his hand, its tongue felt like sandpaper. Again, the man found the desire to live through helping the puppy. Though completely drained of energy, he put his palms on the couch and pushed with all of his might, feeling his entire back peel from the cushion's fiber. His legs felt like wet noodles, but he somehow made it to a standing position. He fought through the fog in his mind to remember where water was stored in the bunker. He found numerous large barrels against one wall, but was unlikely to figure out how to open them in total darkness. Instead, the man needed to find one of the water bottles on the shelves – all likely knocked over during numerous quakes.

He turned left toward the area where the shelves had once been, but he only took a few steps before his foot got caught on something. Normally, this wouldn't have caused him to stumble, but he was so weak and loopy that he crashed to the floor. Knowing he'd never make it to the shelves on his feet, the man slowly crawled in that direction, moving a few feet at a time before stopping to rest his weary arms, which could hardly hold his weight. The challenge of finding a water bottle in the darkness suddenly seemed as daunting as climbing Mount Everest – *those temperatures would sure feel nice about now*, he thought – but he thought of the puppy a few feet away and continued to crawl.

As lucky as he'd been to stumble upon the couch earlier, the man realized furniture was bigger than a small bottle. That was why

he considered his luck officially changed when he crawled forward and his hand landed on a plastic bottle mere feet away. He immediately knew what he found and carefully picked it up, hurrying back to the dog. The cap was difficult to unscrew in the dark – the skin on his hand felt like it was being ripped free as he twisted – but his first sip of water was possibly the most wonderful thing he'd ever tasted. The water tasted as warm as bath water, but that was much cooler compared to the rest of the room. Liquid ran down his throat and through his insides, bringing energy and relief to his body. He'd barely finished taking his first gulp before trickles of perspiration appeared on his forehead, sweat that instantly cooled him.

The man wanted nothing more than to drink the entire bottle, but he was sure to save plenty for his friend. Feeling rejuvenated, he picked up the dog and pulled it closer. Very carefully, he poured water into his cupped hand and held it in front of the dog's face. At first, the dog licked slowly, its tongue practically rolling out of its mouth and dropping into the tiny puddle. But once it took a few sips, the puppy came back to life and lapped away until the man's hand was dry. As he poured more water, the puppy practically jumped all over him, knocking over precious liquid in the process.

"Calm down, girl," the man said, his voice stronger than it had been since the comet struck. "You need to relax and let me pour."

He wasn't sure how the dog understood, but it stopped jumping and waited patiently while the man poured. With just as much enthusiasm, the dog drank every sip of water again. Though the man still couldn't see a thing – he doubted his eyes would *ever* adjust to utter darkness – he felt the slightest breeze and somehow knew the puppy's tail happily wagged, despite the ground shaking slightly and there being no end to the heat inside the bunker. Once the water bottle felt light, the man decided the dog had had enough and that he needed to drink the rest. There was barely enough for one more gulp and he realized the water would probably pass through his skin in the matter of minutes.

"I can't sit around and let myself become weak again," the man said. "I need to get these lights back on."

As if to agree with him, the dog jumped up and licked the man's face. Now that they both felt among the living again, the man and dog got off of the couch. His head still throbbed, but the water brought enough clarity to remember where the light switch was located. He stumbled forward, keeping his footing as he stuck his hand out to the wall. It took a few minutes, but he finally found the light switch. He flicked it up and down a few times, but discovered his luck hadn't gotten *that* much better. The man remembered the generator at the end of the hallway, which was unlikely to be clear after the quakes. Therefore, he'd need to find an alternate source of light and that meant only one other option: a flashlight.

Upon arriving at the bunker, he'd taken an extensive inventory of what was stocked in this room, from hundreds of cans of food and water bottles to the large chest of other objects: rope, medicines, utensils, weapons, batteries and – most importantly at the moment – two large flashlights. The only problem would be finding that chest in the dark and retrieving one of the flashlights before energy drained from his body again.

The man wasted no time in his search and the puppy followed close behind, running into the back of the man's heels several times on the slow, careful walk across the room. He hoped luck would find him again and he'd stumble into another water bottle or two, but that was not meant to be. He tripped over several piles of dirt and cans along the way but reached the chest before finding more water. The latch was difficult to figure out in the dark, but he threw open the lid and started rifling through the box of goods, pushing aside anything that wouldn't provide light. When he finally found the cylindrical-shaped object, he desperately searched for the ON button, disappointed when he heard a *click* but saw no light.

"It doesn't feel bottom heavy like most flashlights," the man told the dog, which sat next to him. "I know what *that* means."

He unscrewed the bottom of the flashlight. Not surprisingly, he found no batteries inside. Growing more frustrated, the man continued to dig through the chest of objects until he found the package of batteries – a package made of hard plastic the man *always*

had trouble opening, even when he had a sharp knife and plenty of light to see. He fumbled around in the dark, trying to tear the package open to no avail, succeeding in nothing more than draining himself of energy.

With the help of one of the knives he found in the chest, the man finally ripped open the packaging, clumsily sending the batteries flying all around. Luckily, a few remained in the packaging and he finally loaded the flashlight after a few attempts to figure out which way to place them. He *clicked* the button again, but this time the high-powered flashlight shined a bright beam on the room.

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As expected, he found the bunker in complete shambles. Most of the shelves remained upright – though tilted – on the far side of the room, yet every can of food had fallen to the floor, some piled three or four atop one another. The water barrels and furniture were mostly in place, having vibrated a few feet to one side or another. Dirt piles covered just about everything in the room, a mess the man would need countless hours to clean. In fact, he doubted he'd ever be able to restore the bunker to its pristine, pre-strike condition.

“Guess I’ll have to get used to living with some dirt,” he told the puppy.

He shined the light on the dog next to him, its tail wagging now that it could see. The dog tried to climb the man’s leg – it clearly wanted to be held – but the man was sapped of his energy and felt sweat evaporating off of his body. He shined the light on the floor and maneuvered around the mess to find another bottle of water. For the second time, drinking water re-energized him and the dog. The man was tempted to down another bottle, but knew he had limited supplies that might have to last a long time.

Able to think clearly again, he shined the light on the ceiling and slowly walked around the room, casing the damage done to the foundation. He saw plenty of cracks in the wood above and there was one part of the room that had all but collapsed. But the foundation still seemed strong for the most part.

“Maybe this place will remain standing after all,” he told the dog.

Just then, fate tested his theory. The rumbling began again, another severe aftershock from earlier quakes. The man had trouble remaining on his feet, especially as the dog whined and tried to scratch its way up his leg. The nails on the little animal’s paws were sharp and the man eventually picked up the dog, whose heartbeat he felt pounding through its tiny chest. Thankfully, being held calmed the dog, even if it didn’t bring an end to the whining.

“Don’t worry, this is normal after an earthquake,” he said, though more for his own benefit than the dog.

He watched the shaky beam of light cascade against the ceiling and was relieved that the ceiling continued to hold under Mother Nature’s onslaught. The shaking lasted less than a minute, though the man was sure the aftershocks were far from over. With the dog in one hand and the flashlight in another, the man continued to study the ceiling until he came upon the single vent, which led to the surface and provided the only means of ventilation. Amazingly, not a speck of dirt fell through the vent, which had survived the extreme shaking. But just because dirt hadn’t come through the vent didn’t mean it was completely clear of unwanted intruders.

The man nearly missed the shimmering heat waves bleeding into the room; he thought maybe his vision had been affected by the heat, that he simply wasn’t seeing clearly. But he soon realized that it looked like a desert oasis leaking through the vent, not to mention that this part of the room felt significantly hotter than the rest of the bunker. The man considered blocking the vent to stop the intense heat. But without proper ventilation – or a way to get rid of carbon dioxide he exhaled with every breath – it wouldn’t matter how comfortable the temperatures became. There was little the man could do but wait out the heat and hope the surface cooled soon.

If the bunker was *this* hot, he tried to imagine sweltering conditions on the surface. Some experts predicted that the comet explosion would produce a massive wave of heat and fire that would sweep across the entire globe, incinerating everything in its path. The

man should've considered himself lucky that a mini-wave of fire hadn't rushed through the vent and ignited anything flammable inside the bunker. There was no doubt the world was burning and he wondered how long such a conflagration would last, how long the devastation would continue until Earth was thrust into another Ice Age – which was what the scientific community theorized would happen next.

I guess the heat is better than the cold, he thought.

Having the lights off might've kept the room a bit cooler, but the man was tired of pitch blackness and knew that batteries didn't last long in heavy-duty flashlights. He headed toward the tunnel that led to the generator – and eventually to the surface – but barely took a few steps inside when he found the path blocked. He put the dog down and started to dig through dirt, hoping only a small section of tunnel was blocked. The man aimed the flashlight at the pile of dirt and got on all fours to shovel his way through. The puppy watched him the first few seconds before joining in the fun. But the two made limited progress in the first few minutes, accomplishing little more than exhausting energy they'd gained from the last bottle of water. He finally gave up as he heard the deep rumbling again, the noise much louder now that he was closer to the surface. As if to prove that most of the tunnel – as well as the generator – was probably covered in dirt, the new round of shaking caused this end of the tunnel to start raining down dirt and debris. The man grabbed the flashlight and rushed back into the bunker's main room, whistling for the dog to follow.

The newest quake lasted a shorter time than the others, but extra damage to the tunnel had been done. He knew that now wasn't the right time to start trying to dig, not with the unstable tremors and extreme heat. So even though he wanted nothing more than lights and power, the flashlight would have to do until digging conditions improved. He shined the light on the dog just as it shook away the dirt that had fallen on it.

“Come on, girl, I think we have to wait this out,” he said.

The dog followed him to the couch, shaking free as much dirt as possible. The man found another water bottle on the ground nearby

and took a single gulp, fighting the urge to chug the entire thing. He gave the puppy a few licks but then tightened the cap, saving the rest for later. He sprawled across the couch and clicked off the flashlight as the dog curled up next to him. The anxiety of today's events had taken a lot out of him mentally *and* physically; the fatigue he now felt had little to do with the extreme heat. He closed his eyes, ignored the pain in his head, and quickly drifted to sleep.

Neither the man nor his dog woke during subsequent aftershocks.

CHAPTER TWO

AUGUST 26, 2020

FOUR DAYS AFTER IMPACT...

Digging was strenuous work, especially on an empty stomach, with horrible working conditions, and using a left hand so bandaged it was almost worthless. Still, the man did his best to clear as much dirt as possible, though it took him nearly three hours to realize that any dirt he moved was immediately replaced by more that trickled down from the ceiling of the damage tunnel. As much as he wanted to give up, he knew that wasn't an option, not if he wanted to save himself and the dog that sat at his heels. He plopped on the ground next to the dog – which he still hadn't named – and tried to conserve energy, though his stomach grumbled so loudly he expected the noise to echo inside the tunnel.

"I don't know what to do," the man told the dog. "Even if I had a shovel down here, I don't think I'd get through. In fact, I don't know if a *bulldozer* would make much difference."

The dog whined and wagged its tail.

"I *know* I should try to stay positive," the man argued. "But we don't know how much of the tunnel is buried. If I had to guess, I'd say the *entire length* is covered in dirt."

This time, the dog didn't make a noise or move an inch. Still, the man read some sort of response from the dog's stillness.

"You're right, only one section of the tunnel might be buried. I *hope* you're right because we'll be living in total darkness for a long time if the whole thing is blocked," he said.

At that moment, the flashlight's beam dimmed slightly, though it was still noticeable enough that both man and animal looked at each other.

"It's only been a few days and the batteries are already dying," he said. "I know there were plenty of spares in that package, but the rate we're going, they'll be used up in a month."

The man sighed and *clicked* off the flashlight, knowing the light was doing him no good. The tunnel was thrust into total, all

encompassing darkness again, which depressed him more than the fact that the tunnel seemed completely blocked. For the last three days, the man had made a point of leaving the flashlight turned off to prolong the battery life. He'd only turned it on a few minutes each day, but spent the overwhelming majority of time in total darkness.

Though his situation seemed utterly hopeless, the man couldn't give up. An idea suddenly came to mind, one that involved using part of the damaged bunker foundation.

"It is a long shot, but we have to try something," he told the dog as he headed back toward the bunker.

The man could've turned on the flashlight – even momentarily – to make his trip easier, but over the last few days, he'd forced himself to become familiar with the bunker in complete darkness. Though his movements were slow and careful, he eventually made his way to the damaged section, where he'd leaned a few wooden beams against the wall two days earlier. Soon after he'd thought aftershocks were done for good, the man worked hard to tidy up the bunker as best as he could. It took hours to find all of the cans and bottles littering the floor, which he carefully placed on shelving units. But just when he thought he'd finally accomplished something worthwhile, Mother Nature laughed in his face and created another aftershock, completely undoing hours of work in seconds.

Now, cans still scattered the floor, as he refused to clean again until the lights were restored. Luckily, the beams had remained where he put them. He struggled to drag one toward the tunnel, a combination of extreme hunger and an injured hand making the task nearly impossible. Both weaknesses had been caused by the same thing: a missing can opener. He specifically remembered seeing it before the comet strike, but had not located the precious tool since, even with the help of five minutes of flashlight time. His hunger had gotten so bad a few days earlier that he couldn't look for the opener any longer. Instead, he'd taken a hunting knife from the chest and used it to stab open a can of peaches. He'd been successful carving open the lid, but sliced his hand in the process. He'd been so annoyed with his clumsiness that he barely ate half the peaches before giving

the rest to the dog, who scarfed down the fruit without stopping to take a single breath. The man wrapped the cut with a strip of cloth he tore from his sock, but was glad the chest also contained a bottle of peroxide to clean the wound.

Still, the gash probably could've used a dozen stitches or so and he felt the scab – which took a long time to form – rip free as he lugged the beam into the tunnel. The man cursed loudly from pain, but felt bad when the dog ran away in fear. Despite the pain and blood that oozed from the dirty bandage, the man retrieved the rest of the beams from the bunker, sapping his energy in the process. He suddenly wished for an open can of food – even some more peaches – but knew he couldn't risk trying to use the knife again. Working with one hand was bad enough; it would be nearly impossible to work if he somehow injured his good one.

Once the heavy lifting was done, the man took a long gulp of water, but wouldn't allow himself to rest for long. He'd only become weaker with the more time that passed, making it vital to reach the generator and figure out a way to reestablish the bunker's power source. He positioned wooden beams on either side of him on the floor, stacking them atop one another until he had two piles, each about two feet high. He proceeded to place a few shorter, broken pieces of wood across the top, connecting the two piles. By no means had the man created a sturdy structure, but it was the best option he had – the *only* option he had.

He dug a few inches on one side of the dirt pile and slid the first wood piles forward, repeating the process on the other side. The makeshift brace actually worked, even though the work was slow going and created less room for him to maneuver. For hours, he battled fatigue and hunger and claustrophobia and – most importantly – dirt, hundreds of pounds that could be moved only a few handfuls at a time. But the bracing system continued to hold and he pushed the beams farther and farther into the massive pile, before squeezing his body into the tiny opening he'd created for himself. He shimmied along the ground until the entire length of his body was beneath dirt, working tirelessly to clear a path through the tunnel, afraid that at

any moment, the brace would collapse and thousands of pounds of dirt would bury him alive – or crush him to death; he wasn't sure which would actually happen first.

The work was exhausting, and once he pushed the beams in so far that they'd go no farther, a part of him considered giving up. In his hours of work, he'd only cleared ten feet of dirt and estimated the generator was at least fifty or sixty feet farther down the tunnel. He'd never be able to find enough lumber to get that far and even if he could, he had no idea how he'd fix a buried generator.

This is it, this is the last trip I'm taking through this pile, he thought as he scooped away a final bit of dirt. But before he turned off the flashlight to shimmy back, he heard a *rustling* behind him. At first, his heart felt like it had stopped. His first thought was that the brace was about to give way. He suddenly felt his furry friend against the side of his leg, moving toward the front. The puppy arrived next to his head seconds later, the first time in hours it had braved the small tunnel he'd formed through the pile of dirt.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked. "There's barely enough room for one of us let alone both."

Although he spoke like he was upset by the dog's appearance, he was actually glad to have company in the tiny space, glad to have something to distract him. But when the dog licked his face – almost as though in a celebratory manner – the man felt ashamed that he'd failed. He did not look forward to hearing the puppy's response to this failure.

"I'm sorry, but this isn't going to work, at least not now," he said disappointedly. "I need to get some sleep and something to drink. There seems to be no end in sight to the dirt, so I need to regroup and figure out where to go from here."

But the man saw that the dog was not interested in his explanation, as it crawled beyond his head and started to dig at the spot where the man had left off. The dog dug furiously, flinging mounds of dirt in the man's face.

"Hey, stop that," he said, though the dog ignored the command. "Fine, dig as much as you want, but you'll have to do it in

the dark.”

The dog paid him no mind so the man turned off the flashlight. Even in the dark, he still heard the scratching just in front of him and knew the animal hadn’t stopped. With the light off and the man’s muscles fatigued, a part of him wanted to close his eyes and fall asleep right there, listening to the soothing sound of the dog’s scratching paws. But dirt still occasionally hit him in the face and his mind constantly reminded him that his brace could give way at any second. After a few minutes of resting, the man began to slowly crawl backward, knowing his dog would eventually follow.

He’d barely moved a few inches when he stopped, confused by something he felt against his face. He’d grown used to sweat trickling down his brow and dirt sticking to every part of his head, but he *hadn’t* felt a breeze – faint as it may be – since before the comet had struck. At first, he thought his tired mind might be playing tricks on him, that the dog’s paws dug so quickly that they whipped up a slight breeze. But he lay still for nearly a minute and clearly felt the breeze growing stronger. Just when he realized this breeze was definitely *real*, the sound of the dog’s digging came to an abrupt stop.

“Hey, what’s going on up there?” he asked.

He heard the pitter-patter of the dog’s paws taking off. He reached for the flashlight clipped to his belt. He pushed the button and aimed the beam straight ahead, where he could barely believe what he saw. The puppy was nowhere in sight, having climbed through the hole and taken off. It broke through to the other side, a sight that gave the man a burst of adrenaline to crawl forward. His wooden brace could be forced ahead no farther, but the opening was only a few feet beyond that. The hole was small enough for the puppy to get through, but after less than a minute of digging, the man cleared enough space for his own thin body.

If he’d had the proper energy, he would’ve stood in this clear section of tunnel and jumped for joy. Instead, he lay on the ground and looked at the rest of the intact tunnel, which had miraculously survived dozens of earthquakes and aftershocks. In the distance, the puppy *barked*, its young voice still unable to produce any sound

remotely menacing. The man stood up and rushed toward it, finding the dog sitting in front of the small enclosure that housed the generator and a dozen barrels of fuel.

“I know, I know. You were right, I was wrong,” the man said. “There’s no need to rub it in.”

The flashlight’s beam grew dimmer by the moment. Luckily, the man quickly discovered several loose wires on the generator. He shut off the power switch and reconnected the loose wires that had apparently been yanked free during the shaking. When he flipped the generator’s power switch back to its ON position, nothing happened. Before he had the chance to look for what he’d missed, he heard the large machine start to slowly *whir*, gradually gaining power until he knew he’d done it. The dog also must’ve sensed success, as it scratched at the man’s leg until he picked it up.

“I think it’s time to check if the lights are working,” he said. “*And* see if we can’t find that damn can opener.”

The first part was answered in a few seconds. When he looked toward the dirt pile, he could see beams of light through the small opening at the bottom. The light from the bunker’s main room could be seen all the way up the tunnel and the man realized he no longer needed to waste batteries. Before he turned off the flashlight, curiosity got the better of him and he proceeded toward the surface. But he only walked a few more feet before finding another severely damaged section of tunnel; there would still be a lot of digging until he reached the surface.

But he would deal with that problem later. At the moment, he was more than satisfied with what he had down here. As long as he used his resources sparingly, he saw no reason why he couldn’t survive underground for months – maybe even years – until the surface was livable. The man turned off the flashlight and headed toward the light at the end of the tunnel, excited to get back to the bunker and find something to eat. He put the puppy down in front of the hole and it obediently scooted through to the other side. The man lay on his stomach and started to crawl through as well, his arms outstretched, using his remaining strength to pull the rest of his body

through.

Now that so much light shined through the opening, he could tell just how tight a squeeze it was, how unsteady the two sides of the wooden brace were. For the first time since the sweltering surface heat penetrated the bunker, the man felt a chill down his spine and tried to hurry through as quickly as he could. When the lights were off and he felt little reason for living, he hadn't been nearly as frightened or claustrophobic as he felt now. But his future seemed brighter – literally.

In his haste to reach the other side, the man smashed his elbow into one of the smaller wooden beams that acted as a cross-section for his brace. He hadn't quite gotten used to dealing with pain, and the space under the dirt was too tight for him to rub his elbow. But the sudden *cracking* sound above his head brought a sickened feeling to his stomach far worse than the bump on his head and gash across his palm. The piece of wood cracked in half just as he looked up. Had his reflexes not been aided by a burst of fear-induced adrenaline, the man never would've moved his head before the beam smashed against the ground – less than an inch from his ear. When he remembered to breathe again, he let out a long sigh, though his relief was short-lived. Another beam – this one near his feet – cracked and dirt started to rain on the man's feet, filling in the small opening he'd worked so hard to clear.

Once two cross beams broke, the weight of the dirt became too heavy for the brace to hold. The rest of the wood *creaked* loudly and the man knew what was about to happen. If he'd been in a rush to get out from the dirt before, he was completely panicked now. He squirmed ahead while more dirt fell around him. He didn't have far to move, but there was little space to maneuver, especially once other beams started splintering and the falling dirt weighed down his body. He crawled closer to the light – where his dog sat, awaiting his arrival – and was inches from breaking free when an avalanche fell ahead of him, thrusting him back into total darkness.

The man tried to scream but got a mouthful of dirt for his effort. He tried to clear away dirt with his outstretched arms, but

there was no way he could move. He breathed in short sniffs through his nose and felt dirt slowly rising through his nostrils. He knew he was about to run out of air. After everything he'd already survived – after defying all odds to get the generator working again – he was going to come up inches short of the bunker. He thrashed wildly in a final attempt to force his way through but quickly ran out of air. He felt his mind slowing and though he could see nothing but dirt in front of his eyes, he felt a whole different sort of blackness coming over him...

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When he saw a pinprick of light, the man wondered if he was dead, if he was about to see a totally different tunnel filled with light. But he still felt the weight of dirt atop his body as the pinprick grew larger. He recognized the sound of *scratching* again and saw the sudden appearance of two paws, which moved so quickly that they appeared as a blur. Moments later, dirt was cleared from his face and he inhaled deep gulps of air, choking on dirt in the process. It took him nearly a minute to recover, as he spit out mouthfuls of earth and struggled to move his hand toward his face to clear his vision.

“You did *real* good,” the man told his dog, his voice not much louder than a wheeze. “You saved my life.”

The dog stopped digging long enough to lick the man's face, but then continued to clear dirt from the man's other trapped arm. Although hurt from the sheer weight of so much dirt, the man used the rest of his energy to pull himself free. Once clear of the pile, he lay on the ground for several minutes, taking deep breaths while staring at the tunnel's ceiling, which he could now actually see. He was happy to be alive – a sentiment that seemed a common theme for him lately – and knew he never would've made it without the help of the unnamed dog next to him. A human had saved his life by telling him about this bunker; now, an animal had saved his life by digging him out. As the puppy remained by his side and licked his hand, the man finally came up with a name, one that seemed appropriate.

He stood and limped toward the bunker, his puppy happily

prancing along side of him.

“Come on, Real,” he said, the first of countless times he’d speak the dog’s name. “Let’s find that can opener and get something to eat.”

CHAPTER THREE

JANUARY 5, 2022

ONE YEAR, FOUR MONTHS, FOURTEEN DAYS AFTER STRIKE...

The man stood from the couch and walked toward the other side of the dark room, forgetting for a moment whether his eyes were closed. Having spent almost five hundred days inside the bunker – a large majority of that time in darkness, as he still conserved fuel in the generator – he had grown adept at moving in the dark. He knew exactly how many steps he needed to take from one spot in the room to any other spot, how far he had to walk to get from the couch to the food shelves, from the large chest to the water barrels, from the tunnel entrance to the light switch. But despite how graceful and proficient he'd become at maneuvering in the pitch black, the same could not be said for his friend.

“Oww! Watch where you're going, Real,” he told the dog.

Real still followed him wherever he went, but hadn't quite mastered the whole darkness thing. And since he wasn't a little puppy anymore, Real could cause some serious damage when he ran into the back of the man's legs. He was able to keep his footing this time, but that wasn't always the case; there'd been plenty of times he was knocked to the floor. The man didn't know much about dog types – the only way he could describe Real was ‘big’ – so he wasn't sure if Real was supposed to be so clumsy. But regardless of Real's four left paws, the dog remained playful and happy during their long months of underground solitude. The man still felt energized by hatred and the thought of revenge, but Real's constant companionship was what kept him going on a day-to-day basis.

The man momentarily lost track of how many steps were left until the wall, but he recovered to find the light switch, which he promptly flipped up. The overhead bulbs flooded the room with light and the man and dog simultaneously closed their eyes. It took them both a minute to get used to the light after spending so much time in darkness. The two proceeded toward the wall nearest the tunnel, where the shelves of canned food and barrels of water were stored. It

had been well over a year since the man had redecorated, with the key move being the food supplies from one side of the room to the other. The man needed the far wall for a different type of storage.

He reached for the can opener – the precious tool had an entire shelf to itself so he'd never misplace it – and then grabbed a can of food without looking at the label to find out what he was about to eat. Although he'd made a large dent in the overall food supply, the man knew he was here for the long haul and had enough discipline to avoid eating more than once a day – a rule he was sure Real didn't agree with.

“Let's see what we've got today,” he said as he finished opening the lid. He removed the lid and revealed boiled white potatoes. Very few types of food excited him less than these potatoes, though he was sure Real would be happy to eat anything – the dog always was. “Looks like your favorite.”

Despite poor eating habits, the man rarely felt hunger anymore, rarely had the desire – and by this point, the *ability* – to eat much. Most days, he forced food down his throat for sustenance only; it was impossible to enjoy eating canned food anymore. These potatoes were worst of all, and he barely shoved three into his mouth before he put the can on the floor. Real, on the other hand (or paw), never had any qualms about the food in front of him. This time was no different. As usual, the dog shoved its snout so far into the can that the man thought it might get stuck. Real ate voraciously and finished the rest of the potatoes before the man finished chewing his three. He had to grab the can off of the ground before Real starting chomping away at the metal.

The dog cheerily stood on his hind legs and reached his front paws toward the can in the man's hand, nearly knocking over his master in the process.

“Calm down, I know what you want,” the man said.

The man removed the heavy wooden lid of a nearby water barrel, this one nearly empty. He turned the can upside down and poured the remaining potato juice – the little that Real hadn't lapped up – onto the floor before dipping it into the water barrel. He took a

long gulp – his thirst hadn't diminished nearly as much as his hunger – before dipping it in again and putting it on the floor. While Real might've been clumsy with his movements, he never spilled a drop of water and carefully drank until the can was empty. The man replaced the heavy lid on the barrel before picking up the can.

“This barrel is almost empty. We'll have to work extra hard today,” he said.

Though the man wasn't overly concerned about his food supply, he didn't feel the same about the remaining water. While he'd only consumed about a quarter of the food, the overall water supply would be half gone once he finished this barrel in the next week or so. The thought made him shiver, though a life without water – or even worse, a life of drinking the juices from potato cans – wasn't the only reason he now had the chills.

The bunker was cold, a far cry from the initial days of extreme heat after the comet strike. Even though his clothes were grimy and worn from constant use, there was no way he'd ever consider ditching them. His savior had remembered to stock plenty of supplies in the bunker, but apparently hadn't had time to add clothing to the list. Thankfully, two blankets *had* been stuffed into the bottom of the chest and the man rarely went anywhere without one of them. One remained on the couch at the moment, but the other was wrapped tightly around his shoulders.

With the empty cup in hand, the man headed toward the tunnel and approached the first collapsed section, the site of his near death experience a few days after the strike. While a normal person might've avoided such an area rife with bad memories, the man knew he couldn't do that. Instead, he worked diligently to dig and reinforce another path through the massive pile of dirt, work that was much easier done with sufficient lighting and a full stomach. As was their routine, Real crawled through the opening first, as *he* was now the one with the tighter squeeze. Once Real was through, the man got on all fours and quickly crawled through as well, the task much easier since he'd constructed the sub-tunnel to be higher and wider than the first one. He'd been sure to reinforce the space so well that the thought of

being buried alive never entered his mind anymore.

The tunnel on the other side was colder than the rest of the bunker, as the collapse had served as an extra bit of insulation. The man stood and brushed dirt off of his blanket before wrapping it tighter around himself, knowing the temperature would get colder with every step closer to the surface. One day, he hoped to walk along this tunnel and feel it getting warmer, but that was something he didn't expect to happen for a long time; he rarely considered it anymore.

"Go ahead, Real, you know what to do," the man said once they reached a small area dug out just for the animal. The one good thing about cold weather was that it kept the smell of Real's section to a somewhat bearable level, though the man still held his breath every time he walked past it.

He continued along the tunnel, passing the area with the generator – which continued to *hum* smoothly, as the man was sure not to overuse it – and finally approached the collapsed end. He took his empty potato can and plunged it into the wall of dirt, scooping out enough so the can was overflowing. Careful not to spill a single speck of dirt, he turned and headed back toward the bunker, where he took the can to the far wall. Lined against that wall were hundreds of cans of dirt, carefully piled atop one another, seemingly on the verge of tipping over. But not a single can had fallen in over a year, not since he finished covering the entire wall and started a second row. Also against the wall were numerous empty barrels of water. All but one was completely filled with dirt. The man took his can of dirt and tipped it into this barrel – which was mostly full – just as Real caught up with him.

"We're getting there, Real, ," he said. "We'll probably only have to fill this can another couple hundred times or so."

The dog barked, deep and booming. The man sometimes wondered if the dog's bark would be loud enough to topple the pile of cans.

"*I know* we have to hurry," the man said. "Remember, *I* was the one who told *you* that the other water barrel is almost empty. Believe

me, I realize this one has to be completely filled before the other is emptied.”

With that in mind, he returned to the tunnel and filled the can again, dropping its contents into the barrel, watching the level of dirt inside slowly – *very* slowly – rise. Sometimes he kept count of how many trips he made through the tunnel each day, but today he lost track after thirty. Had there been unlimited space in the empty water barrel, the man would’ve had no problem working for hours on end. But since the next water barrel wouldn’t be empty and ready for filling for at least another week, he didn’t want to finish filling this one and rob himself of his daily work routine. Therefore, he didn’t push himself too hard and soon filled the potato can a final time.

“Now stay back, Real,” he informed the clumsy dog.

Real did as told and sat next to the couch. The man had one spot left on his current stack and had to pull the chest over to stand on. Still, he wasn’t very tall and barely reached the top, even while standing on his tiptoes. It was inevitable that he’d topple a stack of cans one day, but that wouldn’t happen today. He expertly placed the can on top of the others without so much as a single sway.

“I told you I wouldn’t knock it over.”

With the day’s work done, he dragged the chest back to its normal spot and opened it for his daily entertainment. Unfortunately, the bunker’s builder hadn’t given nearly as much thought to this category as he had to construction – or maybe he never had the chance. With the exception of a few scientific journals, there was nothing else to read. Even though the man read them from front to back dozens of times, he didn’t have any other choice.

“What will it be today?” he asked Real, who lay on the floor next to the couch. “You want to hear about Ceres? *Again*? Okay, whatever you want.”

The man proceeded to read an article about Ceres, the largest asteroid in the belt between Mars and Jupiter. According to this article, Ceres was on the verge of breaking free and possibly heading on a dangerous path toward Earth, a scary thought considering it was many times larger than Clement.

“Let’s hope *that* doesn’t happen,” the man said once he finished reading the article. “We don’t have enough supplies to last through another comet strike.”

He returned the journal to the chest and stumbled upon a small mirror, which seemed an odd addition to the rest of the necessities stored there. He’d seen the mirror plenty of times before, but never really had the desire to look at himself, to look at what he’d become after many difficult months. But today was different for some reason and he finally looked at his reflection.

The man instantly laughed. Had Real’s companionship and his daily routine not ensured his sanity the last sixteen months, the man might’ve gone crazy, might’ve thought he was looking at a totally different person staring back at him in the mirror. The way he appeared – from his ghostly pale skin to his wild hair to his long scraggly beard – certainly made him *look* crazy, even though he still felt mostly normal.

“Wow, I might be hairier than you,” he told Real, though he found it difficult to take his eyes off of the strange reflection. It didn’t seem like long ago when his personal appearance was important to him, that he’d made sure to dress nicely and stay clean-shaven. But he knew that person was gone forever, permanently replaced by this man in the mirror, this *survivor*. As different as the image of his new self was from his old self, the man actually liked the heavily bearded, tougher version; he’d grown an inner strength he never imagined possible.

Feeling a surge of prideful energy, he replaced the mirror inside the chest and switched off the lights, plunging the entire bunker back into darkness. He returned to the couch but instead of lying on the soft cushions, he removed the blanket from his shoulders and dropped to the floor, where he started doing pushups. Despite the monotony of taking cans of dirt from tunnel to bunker, he usually had plenty of excess energy to burn. He tired himself out by doing the only exercising he could. He’d started out barely able to complete a dozen pushups, but now did well over two hundred before breaking a sweat. Gauging the passage of time in the dark was difficult so by the time he

was completely exhausted, the man had no idea how long he'd been exercising.

Once his arms, chest and abs burned to the point he could do no more, he climbed onto the couch and sprawled out, taking deep breaths to regulate his breathing. When he lay still and tried to fall asleep, the man realized how chilly it really was. He covered himself with both blankets, though his body was still hot from the strain of so much exercise. The mixture of perspiration and cold air made him shiver and it wasn't until Real climbed on the couch that he finally felt warm enough to drift off...

CHAPTER FOUR

NOVEMBER 25, 2023

THREE YEARS, THREE MONTHS, THREE DAYS AFTER STRIKE...

The man hardly felt the freezing can in his hand and wished he'd wrapped the second blanket around himself. During the last few months, the temperature in the bunker had actually got warmer – *less cold* was probably a more accurate description. Conversely, the tunnel had clearly grown colder as he dug out more dirt and traveled closer to the surface. It became so bad that Real didn't follow him to the end of the tunnel anymore and instead sat thirty feet back.

"You have fur covering your whole body!" the man chastised, his words turning to steam the moment they escaped his lips. "If anyone should be digging in these conditions, it's you."

The dog stood and started to walk toward him but suddenly stopped, his entire body shivering before he retreated back toward the slightly less freezing part of the tunnel. The dog whimpered, as if apologizing.

"You wimp!"

But the man didn't have time to stand around and criticize Real. His own hand shook in the cold as he reached toward the wall of dirt in front of him. He only made five trips so far today, but knew this would probably be the last. He didn't feel like working hard in the freezing cold and vowed to make up for his laziness the next day. Besides, digging wasn't easy anymore since the dirt was frozen nearly solid. The rim on his can had become severely deformed as he jammed it into the wall during the last five trips, and he had serious doubts about its stability to join the wall of piled cans. A deformed can was to blame for the two collapses during the last month and the man didn't want to waste so much time cleaning dirt and re-stacking.

Because my time is so clearly limited, he thought sarcastically. Still, cleaning up a mess required the lights to stay on and he only had one barrel of fuel remaining for the generator; he'd been spending more time in the dark recently than usual.

The man tried to press the can into the dirt, but he may as well

have pushed it against a wall of ice. He tried pushing harder to no avail, his hand shivering faster, making the task nearly impossible. All he wanted was to give up and head back to the bunker, but in his three-plus years of digging, he'd never failed to return with his can full of dirt. Finally, the man lost his patience – not to mention his desire to keep the can in a stackable shape – and slammed it against the frozen wall, hoping to chip his way through. His arm should've hurt from hitting the rock hard wall, but the cold numbed him to pain. He became frustrated and started to smash the can into the dirt over and over, feeling the can crumpling with every strike. Finally, he unleashed one final blow that sent a wave of pain down his arm and into his shoulder. The man dropped the can and cursed loudly, heading toward the bunker to walk off the pain. He expected Real to run in fear – despite the dog's size, Real truly was a wimp, running away every time the man raised his voice – but the dog sat still for once and continued to stare straight ahead.

“It's about time you realize how big you are and start acting tough,” the man said, massaging his shoulder. The man petted his dog's head, as much to warm his hands as to show affection to Real. But Real immediately stood and walked a few feet to the side, where he sat back down to face the end of the tunnel. The man was confused; Real normally relished every time his master petted him. “I wasn't yelling at *you*, I was yelling at the damn wall. There's no reason to get mad at me and walk away.”

But the dog wouldn't look in his master's direction and continued staring straight ahead. Just before the man was about to ask Real what he was looking at, he noticed the slightest glimmer reflected in Real's eyes. The man quickly spun, surprised to see a pinhole-sized beam of light – *natural* light – penetrating the dirt wall. Real suddenly barked and ran toward the end of the tunnel, ignoring the temperature. The man also forgot about the cold and the pain in his shoulder, too shocked to have reached the end of his digging. This was a moment he'd long dreamed about, but one he hadn't expected to happen any time soon, certainly not now.

Real stepped aside as his master approached; the man wasn't

about to toil with the can any longer. Without stopping to peek through the tiny hole, the man kicked at the dirt wall below the hole. The man expected to find the interior of a basement on the other side, but he knew right away he was wrong. A blast of cold wind and snow rushed through the tunnel and into the man's face, as did intense white light. He covered his eyes at first, but slowly separated his fingers to see a wintry, snow-covered world. Where the house and basement had once been was now a large hole in the ground, not a single trace of any manmade structure. He couldn't see the world beyond the large hole but imagined from rushing wind and falling snow that the surface looked no different.

The man didn't know what to do now that his three-year task was over; he simply stood in the entrance to the surface and looked out. But Real made the decision for him, nearly barreling over the man as he ran outside. Although the dog never showed any signs of disloyalty over the years, the man suddenly panicked that Real would run away.

“Real! Come back!”

But he soon lost sight of the dog as Real climbed up and over a snow bank. Although the man wasn't dressed for the freezing cold – not that he *had* proper clothes for the new wintry world – he climbed out of the tunnel and into the hole where the basement once was. Cold temperatures, harsh wind and falling snow were the first things he noticed on the surface, but he soon realized the world was less white and more gray in appearance. The sky above was hazy, as if some sort of filter had been placed over the atmosphere. Any light that entered Earth seemed strangely dull. Beyond that, there wasn't much to see in this hole, and when he tried yelling for Real again, he barely heard the sound of his own voice over shrill wind.

He followed Real's path of paw prints in the snow, struggling over the snow bank; every step in the deep snow was difficult. Once he climbed out of the hole and onto flat land – or what he imagined was flat land under heavy snow – there was nothing more to see. Not a single shred of the house remained, which made the survival of the tunnel and bunker even more incredible. No trace of human existence

could be seen, yet the man remembered how desolate this area had been before the comet strike. Plenty of trees in this woody area *had* survived, though they all shared a common characteristic besides being covered in snow. Each and every tree – for as far as the man could see – was bent at a forty-five degree angle, as if simultaneously blown over by a massive force. Amazingly, not a single tree seemed to have fallen completely over. Upon closer inspection of the nearest tree, he saw black scorch marks covering half of the trunk; not as much snow covered the tree as he thought. It looked as though some of the snow had actually melted away, another shock since the man doubted *any* snow could've melted considering how much was still around.

In the distance, the man noticed a blur of movement and saw Real. He called for the dog again, but Real either didn't hear him or didn't care to listen as he disappeared around another snow bank. The man felt the entire bottom of his body becoming totally drenched from snow, and he wanted to head back into the bunker to prepare for such a surface trip. But considering how clumsy and dumb Real could sometimes be, the man didn't want to give his dog a chance to get lost and not find his way back. He rushed through the snow and followed tracks around the snow bank, hoping Real hadn't gotten too far away. The man was so focused on looking into the distance that he nearly missed Real on the other side of the snow pile.

"Don't *ever* run away like that. Don't you know how easily you could get lost?" he asked.

The man thought he heard Real's whine over the *howling*, but he wasn't sure. Either way, the dog didn't budge from his spot facing the snow bank, barely glancing at the man before turning his eyes forward again.

"Come on, we have to get back inside before we freeze. Don't worry, we'll have plenty of time to explore later."

But Real did not budge an inch, not even when the man whistled and slapped his hands together.

"Fine, do what you want, but I'm going back in," the man said. "Good luck trying to find your way back."

The man started to walk back toward the tunnel entrance, bluffing in the hope that Real would follow. But just before he turned the corner of the snow bank, he glanced at Real one final time. The dog no longer sat still, as he'd started digging furiously in the snow. The man's curiosity got the better of him and he returned to see what his dog was so desperate to uncover. Real continued to push away the snow, his entire head disappearing into the bank. When Real finally backed away, the man saw a flash of red through the snow and suddenly realized what might be hidden underneath.

"Do you really think it's possible?" he asked Real, his tail wagging happily. The dog shook away snow that had gotten on his fur, but Real did not budge. "You know we could come back later to check when it's warmer."

But the man felt just as excited to dig and his limbs were mostly numb anyway. He started to push aside snow with his hand and arm. Within minutes, he'd cleared away the entire door to the classic red car.

"They *really* don't make cars the way they used to," he said.

With every swipe that cleared more snow, the man expected to see the car in shambles, especially considering the damage done to every tree – not to mention that the house was gone. But not only was the car parked in the same spot where he'd left it after his cross-country race, it also seemed to be in the same condition. Once the door was cleared, he tried the handle and finally ran into his first problem; he couldn't budge it. He yanked harder, but maintaining his grip on the icy handle was impossible. The man removed the blanket from his shoulders and wrapped his hand in part of it, providing enough protection to punch the ice free. The handle finally loosened and after a few more seconds of pulling, the ice around the doorframe finally chipped free. The man lost his balance and fell as the door swung open, but Real did not wait for his master before jumping into the car.

"Thanks a lot," the man said as he struggled to pull himself up. "I do all the work and you get to see the inside first."

The man climbed into the driver's seat and closed the door. It

suddenly became quieter now that the *howling* wind was blocked out, but the interior was much darker, a heavy layer of snow blocking light from every window but the one he'd cleared. Still, from what he saw right away, the car seemed exactly the same as the last time he'd been in it, all the way down to Real sitting in the front seat.

"I guess you're a little bigger than the last time we went for a drive," he said.

Upon hearing the word 'drive,' Real's tailed wagged like crazy and he bumped his head against the passenger-side window, obviously trying to put it down. When Real was a puppy and barely big enough to reach the window, he'd still wanted that window down to stick out his head and feel the breeze. That had been an exciting trip across the chaotic country during Earth's final days. The man wondered what the American landscape would look like the next time he passed through...

"I can't roll down the window with all the snow," he explained.

The man checked the ignition and saw the keys still in there, exactly where he'd left them. Though he didn't think the engine would still run, he couldn't resist the temptation to find out. But just like the frozen door handle, the key seemed stuck in the ignition and did not budge when he tried to turn it. The man initially thought the problem was caused by the cold, but when he looked closer, he discovered the steering wheel column appeared warped. He studied the rest of the car's interior and realized it hadn't escaped damage as well as he thought. Many plastic and rubber parts of the car – from the steering column to the dashboard to the seats – were oddly warped, as if heated to intense temperatures, melted and then solidified in a slightly deformed shape. Keeping that in mind, the man tried turning the ignition again, this time gently working the key around the warped plastic.

When he finally got the key to move, he heard the engine trying to turn over. He pumped the gas repeatedly, but there was obviously another problem and he soon gave up, not wanting to further damage the car. The fact that the engine wasn't completely dead was a positive sign, and he wondered if the fluids in the old car

were simply frozen. Even if he could get it going, the car wouldn't drive anywhere since it was covered in snow and buried so deep. Nothing short of a snowmobile would help him go far; at least a foot of snow needed to melt before he'd attempt to drive away. Now that there was nothing left to do, the excitement of finding the car wore off and he felt freezing again.

"It's time to head back in," he told Real, who whined.

The man opened the door to the howling winds again but suddenly remembered to check one final thing. He reached into the glove compartment and carefully jiggled it open, not knowing what might be inside. The man couldn't recall opening it during his long drive and felt excited about what might be there. Unfortunately, most of the stuff in there was junk he'd never need – registration card, insurance information, old maps with cities and towns that no longer existed. But buried beneath was something that *could* prove useful, something that might determine whether he'd ever get this car running.

"Looks like we have some new reading material, Real," he said, flipping through the first few pages of the thick manual. He held the book up toward the open door, where hazy light from the outside world allowed him to see the faded pages of the manual, which was more than fifty years old. Still, the condition of the book wasn't as bad as it could've been. The words were still legible as well as photos and diagrams of different car parts.

As the man flipped through the pages, Real must've sensed they wouldn't be going for a ride any time. The dog climbed over the man and jumped out of the car. The man was just about to yell at him for almost damaging the book but heard a faint *crinkling* noise and turned toward the empty passenger seat. Real had been sitting on top of a piece of paper, which had partially melted into the seat. The man slowly peeled it away, careful not to rip the paper while doing so. He hadn't thought of the paper since tossing it on the seat before running into the bunker, but he could never forget this letter.

He folded the paper and shoved it in his pocket before wrapping the blanket around his shoulders. Since the man had no

concern about the car being stolen, he left the keys in the ignition before getting out and closing the door. Real stood next to the car, apparently in no mood for further exploration. The man waved his dog back toward the tunnel but when he stopped to look around, the ground was so blindingly white that it was impossible to spot the small entrance. At first, panic surged through him; getting lost on the surface could quickly lead to death from exposure. But he quickly realized to locate his footprints in the snow, which he followed back toward the entrance. It was a good thing they hadn't stayed in the car much longer. The wind whipped so fiercely that their tracks were barely visible, having been filled in by blown snow.

Real traversed the snow bank leading to the hole in the ground where the basement had once been, but the man had no such luck, quickly losing his balance and sliding down the bunker. The cold was starting to affect his motor skills, and it was a great relief when he finally stumbled into the small tunnel opening. Never would the man have considered the tunnel warm until now. He shivered so much and his teeth chattered so loudly that he could not think clearly. His first instinct was to get back to the bunker, cover himself with every blanket and piece of clothing he could find while curling next to Real. But during the fifteen minutes he'd spent investigating the surface, the wind blew a great deal of snow into the tunnel and probably lowered the temperature inside the tunnel *and* bunker – something the man hadn't thought possible.

"B..b..breaking the seal of the s..s..surface was not a g..g..good move," the man told Real. "Now we have to f..f..fix the hole."

The dog whined and sat in his usual spot farther down the tunnel. The man tried using broken shards of frozen dirt to refill the hole, but that did little to block the wind and snow. He eventually realized that he needed some looser dirt.

"C..c..come on, girl," he told Real as he headed down the tunnel. "We st..st..still have a lot of work to do."

Luckily for the man, he had *plenty* of dirt to choose from. He returned to the room – moving as quickly as he could to generate body heat – and proceeded to the back wall, where the stacks of

canned dirt were four rows deep. With his hands so numb they were mostly useless, he carefully reached for the nearest stack. He still shivered so badly that he knocked the stack over, causing a chain reaction until nearly half of the cans – and hundreds of pounds of dirt – covered the floor.

Normally, the man would've been upset by the mess, but now that he'd reached the surface and could leave the bunker whenever he pleased – at least once the weather improved – neatness didn't seem like such a big deal. He scooped up as much dirt as he could in several cans before heading toward the tunnel, not before stopping to take inventory of his remaining food and water.

About six months of water left, probably a few more than that of food, he tallied. And only one barrel of fuel for the generator, which I should try to save now for the car.

Though it was hard to concentrate on anything besides getting warmer and filling the opening to the surface, the man couldn't help but consider cursory plans for his departure. Only able to carry a few cans at a time, he made dozens of trips from the bunker to the tunnel's end over the next few hours, all the time thinking about where he'd go once the weather cleared. With his future tentatively planned – and a mound of dirt mostly blocking the way to the surface – the man finally lay on the couch next to Real. Even though tired and cold and wanting nothing more than sleep, he took the time to unfold the letter, which he'd been looking forward to reading.

"I *know* I have the entire car manual to read now, but you've never heard this letter so I think it's time you should," the man told Real. "Without this letter, neither of us would've survived the comet strike."

He proceeded to read the entire letter from his savior, as he felt gratitude swelling in his chest with every word. When done, he carefully placed the letter back in his pocket before turning the lights out. Once in the dark and about to fall asleep, his mind turned to vengeance, as it usually did. With the supplies at his disposal, the man saw no reason why he couldn't reach Mexico or the Southwest part of America, where he hoped temperatures would be much more

forgiving

“And hopefully that’s where we’ll one day find the man who tried to kill me,” he told Real.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARCH 8, 2024

THREE YEARS, SIX MONTHS, TWENTY DAYS AFTER STRIKE...

If Real had the ability to smile, the man was pretty sure that he'd be doing so right now. The dog's happiness was the only reason he considered putting up with the freezing air that blew through the open passenger side window. After all, he *had* promised Real that once they were on the road again, he could stick his head out of the window, the way he'd done three and a half years ago. The man tried starting the journey without bringing up the whole 'window-down' promise, but Real scratched and scratched at the glass until he finally gave in. Unfortunately, the weather was much colder now than during their first cross-country trip, but Real didn't seem to mind.

"I can't believe your tongue and eyeballs haven't turned to ice yet," he called out over the sound of rushing air. In fact, the man was just as surprised that his *own* eyeballs hadn't turned to ice.

He adjusted the tightly wrapped blanket around his shoulders again, the hundredth time in the last hour. At this point, he was doing so more out of habit than inability to cope with the freezing temperatures. He'd been on the road for days now – he'd already lost track of the exact number – and grew more accustomed to the cold than all the years he'd spent in the bunker underground. Besides, considering the warped tires, the classic car's ancient engine and the snowy, uneven terrain, he barely broke ten miles an hour, which didn't cause the wind to whip too crazily inside the car.

Once he'd completed digging out the bunker's collapsed tunnel, the man's desire to leave the underground bunker grew stronger. Every day for the first six weeks, he spent at least an hour or two outside, clearing snow from the car, venturing farther and farther away from the tunnel to determine how bad driving conditions would be. Though cold temperatures inside the bunker were nearly unbearable over the years, weather outside – which was far colder – hadn't seemed as bad when the man actually had real work to do. And while his first trip to the surface resulted in spending hours under

heavy blankets to return his body temperature to normal, the man had gotten more accustomed to the cold with every subsequent hour on the surface.

When the man had cleared the last of the snow from the car, he'd discovered that the plastic and rubber inside the car weren't alone in the damage. The tires had also warped, though fortunately they hadn't flattened. Having spent the rest of his free time – of which he still had plenty – studying the car manual, the man had a good idea how to get the engine running again. He'd surprised himself with getting the car started, another sign that he should leave the bunker.

The man became impatient in those final days in the bunker, as the minutes ticked by slower than he remembered. Every day he went to the surface, he hoped to find the weather warm enough to justify leaving. But every day, he'd been disappointed to find more snow building up around the classic red car. After a few months, he climbed out of the basement's hole and discovered that while the weather felt as cold as ever, no snow had gathered around the car since the day before. That was all the sign the man needed.

He ran the engine for nearly an hour that day before returning to the bunker, where he'd started transporting the remaining food and water to the backseat. There was still a few months of stuff left so it took him many trips to complete the job, but he was filled with a newfound energy he hadn't felt for years. Next was the remaining barrel of fuel, which he'd slowly rolled through the snow and up the bunker, a task more difficult than anything he'd done. Wrestling the metal barrel into the car's trunk proved nearly impossible, but he hadn't let anything stop him from leaving the next day.

The night before he'd left, he filled the chest with every object he thought he might need. He hadn't slept well that final night in the bunker, though he knew it would be the last time he'd sleep on a surface as comfortable as the couch. He got up several times in the night to check if the sun had started to rise; he hadn't wanted to waste a single moment of daylight. When the moment finally came, he dragged his remaining belongings to the car's backseat, including a few couch cushions he'd squeezed in between all of his stuff.

Surprisingly, the man felt little sentimentality as he drove away from the bunker. He was appreciative for the underground room that had kept him alive, but he hoped to find a much better future for himself in the world – a future spent *above* ground.

Besides, the man was too focused on the roads – or lack thereof – in front of him to worry about how much he'd miss the bunker. Although the old muscle car was tough enough to survive the comet strike, it certainly wasn't an ideal vehicle to drive through three feet of snow, especially since the bunker was miles from civilization and real roads. The first few days of driving were pure hell – at least a freezing, snow-covered version of the worst place imaginable. The man had had to stop dozens of times those first few days, as the tires continued to get stuck. He'd had to dig the car out using a crude shovel he'd fastened out of eight cans strung together attached to a pole, a device that made the job only slightly easier than if he used his hands. If it hadn't been for Real's help, the task would've taken at least two hours every time instead of one.

More than once during those initial days, the man had considered turning back to the safety of the bunker, where he could wait out the weather another few months. But every extra mile he traveled made the chances of finding his way back more remote; he figured that if he were going to die, he'd rather do it to trying to escape to warmer weather than trying to return to where he knew it was cold. He'd barely traveled a few miles those first days, and without any signs of distinguishable landmarks, the man felt like he was aimlessly wandering. He reached a fork in the path on the fifth or sixth day and had no idea which way to turn. The stress of driving and the tediousness of constantly getting stuck had sapped most of his revenge-fueled energy, not to mention how he'd barely slept since leaving. When he'd impulsively turned right – without any particular reason for doing so – Real commenced barking, his usual signal that he needed to go outside.

“Can't you hold it a while longer?” the man asked Real. “It's been almost two hours and we haven't gotten stuck. If I stop now, who knows if we'll start moving again?”

But Real hadn't seemed to care, as he continued to not only whine, but also scratch wildly at his closed window. The man hadn't known why he was in such a panic – they didn't eat until the *end* of each day's travels – but he pulled over and reached across to open his door. Except for the first day he'd broken through the tunnel, Real never wandered far from his master. But once he'd gotten outside, he turned and ran in the opposite direction that the man was driving. Confused about where he was going, the man immediately got out of the car and yelled for him to stop. Real barked wildly and walked a few more feet before sitting and barking again.

“Why *that* way?” the man called out.

Real continued to bark until the man got in the car and made a U-turn. The dog ran ahead for nearly a mile with the man driving behind, making sure not to get too close in case he had to slam on the brakes. Finally, Real stopped when he was out of breath and climbed back in.

“Are you going to tell me what that was all about?” the man asked.

Minutes later, the man's question was answered. They emerged from the woods and onto a highway, which had a covering of snow nowhere near as deep as the woodsy trail to the bunker. From that point on, the car didn't get stuck in snow another time, as the man headed south on a road marked Interstate 81. That was the moment the man finally had given in and rolled down the window for Real, who quite possibly saved both of their lives.

The drive got much better, even though the highway produced many obstacles of its own. Even though the road conditions were better – especially as snow gradually thinned out the farther south he traveled – experts had been correct in their predictions of the destruction caused by Clement. Many areas along the highway were cracked so badly that the man expected the warped tires to blow at any moment. There was so much wreckage strewn about – from damaged, charred cars to cars that looked perfectly intact to other random pieces of debris the man could not recognize – that he never increased speed much. There were several instances where pileups

were so large that his path was blocked, at which point he'd either push his way through with the classic car or try to drive around. He found keys in the more intact cars – some with more interior space than his old red car – but he never had the heart to abandon the vehicle that had gotten him this far.

Though he might've run across many signs of his former civilization during his journey, he *hadn't* come across a single living human for countless days after leaving the bunker. He hoped that meant survivors were avoiding a life near the highway, or that they already headed south.

"I wonder where we are?" the man asked Real, who brought his head back in the car for a few seconds.

They suddenly drove by a sign in front of a major off-ramp that hadn't suffered damage.

"I-40 West," he said. "You think that heads southwest?"

He slammed on the brakes in the middle of the highway, the first time he stopped during the productive day of traveling. He opened the door for Real to get out and stretch his legs while he consulted one of the maps in the glove box. Unfortunately, he found no reference to this particular road and was pretty sure he'd driven too far south for these maps to be relevant. His goal upon leaving the bunker was to head south and then west, but he didn't know if it was too early to turn now, especially since this stretch of I-81 South had really cleared the last few days. He got out of the car and stretched, standing in the middle of the highway that had less than an inch of snow. Sunlight was still blocked by the hazy atmosphere, but even *that* seemed to clear over time, as the temperature was actually above the point of freezing.

"What do you think we should do?" he asked Real. "You seem to have a better sense of direction than I do."

It was amazing to the man that he could stop in the middle of an interstate and get out wherever he pleased. He looked up the ramp to the western connecting interstate and then down empty I-81.

"I guess if I-81 has gotten us this far, we may as well stick it out a bit longer."

Both got back inside but they made it less than a mile before the decision on which interstate to travel was decided for them. In the middle of I-81 was a pileup larger than the man had yet to come across. Dozens of cars lay spread across the north—and southbound lanes, but that was only a part of the problem. The man could hardly believe his own two eyes – he had to pinch himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming – when he saw an entire building – mostly intact – stretched *across* the interstate, as if God Himself had plucked it out of the ground and carefully placed in on the road. The man slammed on the brakes and stared in disbelief, knowing he’d never get by this mess.

“You want to go inside and check it out?” he said. “Maybe we can find something useful in there.”

The man got out of the car and started walking toward the building, amazed by the good condition it was in despite being uprooted, thrown the air and crashing in the middle of the road. He climbed over several cars and was nearly at the front – where he looked up to see a pair of double doors open – when he looked back and saw Real barely moved from in front of the car.

“Come on, what are you waiting for?” he called out.

The dog barked, but did not move forward. It was rare when Real didn’t follow his master and the man could tell right away that the dog was frightened. That gave the man reason for pause, as his dog had displayed an uncanny ability to sense of danger in the past. But he could not resist the temptation to enter the building, the first sign of humanity he’d seen in years. Real barked one final time before the man was about to climb through a broken window. But if the dog was trying to warn him, he did not listen.

The man was excited when he found plenty of light shining through the other broken windows. A quick glance showed the interior hadn’t survived as well as the exterior. The man did not remain inside long enough to make out anything else. He hardly took a single step when he heard a *crack* beneath his foot, as he stepped on something that made him stumble and fall. At first, he was confused why a mannequin was in this building – *this place doesn’t look like a*

store – until he realized he was face to face with a corpse. The leathery skin had momentarily confused him, but as soon as he figured out what was in front of him – what he had *tripped* on – the man stood up and stumbled back – careful not to step on any other bodies in the process. He nearly dove through the open window to get back outside.

Even though he knew the dead body wasn't going to chase after him, the man ran toward his car as quickly as possible, jumping on and over the damaged cars. Real barked as his master emerged and he jumped into the open driver's door before the man reached it. The man quickly spun the car around and drove north, finally revving the engine and pushing the car to its limit since he knew this stretch of highway was free of dangerous debris.

"I *know* I should've listened to you. I don't know why I ever doubt you," he told Real once he got his breathing under control. "But you could've warned me what was inside."

The dog grunted and the man swore that if Real had the ability to laugh, this was the sound he'd make.

"I *know* I wanted to see another human, but I meant one that was *alive*," he said. "I admit, you're right, I *should* just be happy with your company."

And with that, Real stuck his head out of the window again. This was the fastest the man had driven in more than three and a half years and he was quickly upon the interchange. He slammed on the gas and cut the wheel, expertly drifting on the slick road until he saw the I-40 West sign pointing up the ramp. Although he had a bad feeling that the body in the building wasn't the last corpse he'd see, the man still hoped that heading west would bring more *positive* results than negative.

CHAPTER SIX

Although the man hoped good luck would lead him west, he found the road conditions on Interstate 40 no different than the southern highway. Five days passed since his impromptu trip inside the displaced office building had suddenly changed his course, during which time he'd driven nearly four hundred miles. During that time, one of the tires finally blew and cost him half a day – at which time he taught himself how to unscrew bolts and jack up a car – as he replaced one warped tire with another. He also used the rest of his remaining fuel, as he filled the gas tank one last time before leaving the empty barrel on the side of the road.

Cutting the barrel loose cleared up plenty of space in the trunk, where he'd stored his chest of objects along with most of his remaining supplies. The only things he'd kept in the backseat were his knapsack – which he filled with as many cans and bottles of water as possible, along with the can opener – and the couch cushions. With the added space, the man and Real suddenly had more room for sleeping in the backseat. Both finally got a good night's rest once they were able to stretch out.

Still, the man was sure not to push the car too hard or travel too fast. For days upon end, hour after hour, he barely pressed the gas pedal, hardly ever exceeding ten miles an hour regardless of how clear the roads were. For at least thirty minutes every day, the man let Real out of the car so he could get his exercise, but he didn't have to stop the car. Instead, Real ran in front of him, often running ahead so much farther that he had to *honk* the horn to get him to come back. As on I-81, there was no indication of life and few signs that *anyone* had ever lived around here. The man had no idea what state he was in and more than once, he was tempted to veer off of the main highway and try to find smaller towns, to see what sort of condition these places were in. But he constantly reminded himself about the debacle of his first few days of driving and how difficult it could be to travel on smaller roads. Besides, the fuel gauge in his car slowly tilted closer and closer to the dreaded “E” and he didn't want to divert from his

main mission of getting to the warmer part of America.

On the sixth morning since turning west, the man had barely driven an hour when he saw something in the distance he initially thought might be an aberration. It wasn't until Real brought his head back into the car and barked that the man realized he wasn't seeing things.

"I know, it's about time we found something."

Through the morning haze, he saw dozens of buildings on the horizon, growing higher out of the ground the closer he got. It was clearly the skyline to a major city – the man didn't know which one – and he suddenly felt hopeful that he'd find survivors or at least extra supplies to help his journey. For weeks, he'd fretted about the moment his car ran out of gas and he'd have to abandon it. But this city might have a reserve of fuel. The man suddenly regretted ditching his fuel barrel, but hoped he could find a suitable replacement somewhere in the city.

Real barked in excitement, but the man resisted the temptation to speed up, wanting to milk his remaining gas for as long as possible. It took almost an hour to approach the city, during which time the man saw the standing buildings much clearer, as well as the amount of damage not seen from farther away. While originally filled with hope, seeing the level of destruction sapped away some of that positive energy; he saw how truly decrepit this city had grown over the years.

For every one building that stood, at least three were knocked down, some toppled over as if mere toys. Other buildings had caused a domino effect, one knocking over another knocking over another until entire rows – or streets in this case – slanted on top of each other. But regardless of the devastation, there was still reason for the man to hope, as enough buildings had survived that there might be cause to believe someone had survived, too...

I-40 West remained mostly clear around the city's perimeter, but it didn't take long for the man to realize the interior of the city

would be impossible to drive. Few highway signs remained and those that *did* had melted to blobs of illegible metal. When the man veered down a random ramp, he had no idea which city he was entering or what area of the city it was. Based upon the tall buildings – at least those still standing – the man figured this was the downtown section. He barely made it to the first intersection when he had to stop the car; the roads were far too narrow and cluttered with debris for him to pass.

The man climbed out of the car and for the first time, he jiggled the keys free and took them out of the ignition, despite not spotting a single sign of human existence. Real followed him, though he seemed hesitant, never straying more than a few feet away. Up close, the devastation seemed more incredible, especially when he saw one of the nearby buildings leaned against another, as if ready to topple over from the first strong gust of wind. Even though the destruction seemed absolute and the ghostly city appeared gray and lifeless, the man saw a sight that instantly warmed his heart and gave him reason to believe Earth had survived the strike.

Green.

He ran between a road of smashed cars and crossed the street, where he found the charred remains of a tree that had once graced the sidewalk's corner. Though the tree looked burnt and bent like the trees outside of the underground bunker, the man saw small buds on the lower branches, not to mention patches of green grass through the light dusting of snow on the ground. The man bent over and felt the grass, as plenty of green poked through cracks in the street and sidewalk. Vines and ivy also attacked the façade of many buildings, as Mother Nature was taking control over the unprotected city.

“It’s amazing,” the man told Real, who stopped to relieve himself on the tree. “This place looks like it’s been deserted for fifty years, not just five. I can’t believe how such a big city can turn to ruins so quickly.”

Similar to the highways that the man traveled, a mixture of charred and perfectly unscathed cars littered the city streets. With that in mind, he hoped this ratio of damaged to undamaged objects also

applied to buildings – as well as supplies housed in those buildings.

“I think it’s time to explore,” he said.

Before he walked down the nearest street, the man glanced over his shoulder at the red car, which held all of his worldly belongings, meager as though they might be. The city appeared large during his drive in from the interstate, so he didn’t know how long his exploration might take. He made his way back to the car and grabbed the knapsack from the backseat. He opened it and saw enough food and water to last a few days, but there was still room to hold more. The man considered popping the trunk and filling the sack to its brim, but ultimately decided against that, doubting he’d be gone a whole day let alone three. Besides, he hoped he’d *need* space in his knapsack to carry whatever treasures he found.

With his pack slung over his shoulder, the man wove between the maze of abandoned cars and started walking down the city’s street. Real slowly led the way, his ears erect as he quickly looked from side to side, as if expecting danger to jump out of every window and doorway they passed. Real’s alertness made the man increasingly nervous, though he hadn’t seen cause for concern and hadn’t heard Real whine, which was his true warning sign. The wind picked up as they walked farther; sunlight was partially blocked by surrounding buildings, but the interior of the city was warmer than any place he’d been. There were plenty of buildings to scavenge, but the man was too fascinated with his surroundings to head inside. Besides, he was more interested in finding stores than apartment buildings, which were more likely to have corpses waiting within.

“Maybe we can find a pet store for you,” the man told Real. The quiet of the city streets was so eerie that he started babbling incessantly, the same nervous reaction he’d had all of his life. “I don’t know if you’d like real dog food after eating human food for so long.”

Real ignored his master’s voice and continued listening for the slightest sound of trouble. They slowly approached a dead end and looked down the connecting road, which was just as littered with cars and debris. While there seemed nothing of note to the left, the man spotted numerous stores along the street to the right, which should’ve

made his decision to head that way an easy one. But Real was hesitant to follow and when the man looked up, he realized why. At the end of this road – before the stores he desperately wanted to raid – was one of the buildings that had toppled to the side but hadn't completely fallen over. To get to the end of the street, he'd have to pass beneath the leaning building, a decision tough enough to make him stop in his tracks. He looked at the road behind him and wondered how long it would take to circle around the block, though there was no guarantee he'd find the next street free from danger.

"I'm sure it will be fine," he finally told Real, though the words of encouragement were more for his own benefit than the dog's. "It'll take at least twenty minutes to walk around the block, if not longer. Besides, if the building has been leaning over this long without falling over, I'm sure us walking under won't make it collapse."

Still, his feet remained firmly rooted for nearly a minute, his neck craned back, eyes staring up at the impossibly leaning building. When he finally found the courage to walk forward, he focused on anything but the danger a hundred feet above. Very little snow covered this street, only a few small piles here and there. Cracks in the ground had weeds popping through, not to mention the vines and ivy covering both large buildings. Real paused before they were about to enter the shadow of the toppled building, but the man realized it wasn't out of fear – or at least not *only* fear. Glass covered every inch of this section of street. One glance directly overhead showed why.

Every window in the toppled building was out, glass scattering the ground in front of them. Since Real's paws hadn't had much time to toughen – certainly not to the point where walking on glass was an option – the man was forced to pick him up and carry him across the glassy field. Real was by no means a puppy, and it was a struggle for the man to carry so much extra weight. Still, exertion kept his mind off of fear and it wasn't long before he emerged from the shadow, successfully clearing the danger zone. Real licked the man's face as he put him down, but that did nothing to help his aching back. What *did* help was the clothes store in front of them. For nearly four years, the man was forced to wear the same clothes, which were nothing more

than smelly, old rags. Now that he was in front of a clothes store again, he felt a part of his former self suddenly come back to life.

He rushed inside through the broken door, but was immediately disappointed to see that this wasn't the kind of clothing he expected. Apparently, the man had entered some sort of biker shop. The few remaining items were mostly made of leather. The store had been ransacked at some point – the man assumed rioting before the strike – as few items remained on the racks. But he adhered to the saying that beggars couldn't be choosers and he found enough gear to change his wardrobe. Leaving behind his old rags, he emerged into the daylight wearing jeans, a motorcycle shirt, a long leather trench coat, a pair of black sunglasses and heavy boots, every item of clothing at least two sizes too big.

Real grunted again, the same one the man had sworn sounded like a canine chuckle. But the man didn't care. The leather outfit was much warmer – and far less smelly – than his old clothes.

They proceeded to the large supermarket across the street, which appeared mostly pristine despite damage to the buildings around it. The man knew that any fresh foods – about which he'd been dreaming for three and a half years – had gone bad years earlier, but new canned foods would be just fine. Though most of the store's windows had somehow survived, the entrance was the only area that suffered serious damage, undoubtedly from the large trashcan the man found inside. He and Real stepped through the entrance, his heavy new boots crushing glass under his feet. Though the store seemed structurally sound, the aisles and shelves were a different story. Right away, the man saw that shelves tipped over, similar to some of the surrounding buildings. While this should've meant the floors were a mess, reality was just the opposite.

The man saw nothing on the floor.

"Looks like the rioters cleared this place out, too."

Although that scenario was the only one that made sense, the man's past experience with rioters usually involved people looting expensive, higher ticket items. But the comet had been a situation unlike any he'd ever seen, which made peoples' reactions

unpredictable. Since he was already here – and since he figured to find the rest of the city’s markets in a similarly looted state – the man looked around in case the looters had missed anything. Real apparently had the same idea, as he took off down a nearby aisle.

“Don’t go too far,” the man called out.

Always the perfectionist who required a plan of action, the man walked to the far end of the store. Starting with the first aisle, he planned to comb the entire place, even if it meant finding just one can of food. He approached the section of store where the frozen food had been located. He was confused to find all refrigerator doors completely smashed. It wasn’t exactly a shock that rioters had caused destruction, but there was no need for this damage to be done, as if the glass doors had merely been smashed for fun. And if there was one thing the man knew for certain, it was that *nobody* had had fun during those days before the comet strike.

He continued along the aisle, lifting fallen shelves, searching through any junk he found, all to no avail. The man repeated this process for the next two aisles, accomplishing little more than raising his level of frustration. He felt like he was losing precious minutes and for the first time since entering the city limits, he realized that scavenging wasn’t going to be as easy as he thought; he’d have to put in serious work to find anything of importance. The biker store was probably more of a lucky find than what he should expect. He wondered if continuing into the city was a wise move, or if he should continue west and not waste his time.

I can’t give up this early, he thought. This is only the first store. There has to be places I can find useful things.

The man was just about to start on the third aisle when he heard a *rustling* sound approaching and spotted Real sprinting across the store. He gave a quick whistle just as the dog rushed by his aisle. The dog turned and sprinted toward him, his eyes full of fear, not stopping until he sat behind him.

“What’s wrong, girl?” he asked.

His question was soon answered, but not by the dog. Even though Real sat completely still, the man still heard the *rustling* he’d

assumed was the dog. A person stumbled around the corner of the aisle, but stopped when he saw that Real wasn't alone. The man and the stranger stared at each other, each wondering if the other was shocked to see a new face.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It had been more than three and a half years since the man saw another living human. He often wondered if this moment would come again. He was relieved to finally have proof that he wasn't the last living person on the planet, yet the person in front of him wasn't exactly the type of survivor he'd expected to find.

"I got friends near so you better not hurt me," the stranger said, his voice high-pitched and thickly accented. "You on our territory now so we can make things *real* bad for ya."

Whatever this city was, the man realized from the stranger's accent that he'd traveled farther south than he thought. The stranger looked a lot like the man before he'd changed earlier: dirty, torn and mismatched clothes that hung off of his thin body, disheveled hair that hung off of his face and head. He couldn't have been more than an inch or two above five feet, no more than a hundred-twenty pounds. He walked with a limp and there seemed to be a problem with the entire right side of his body. Most peculiar was that the stranger hardly looked at him and instead stared in Real's direction, licking his lips in a way that sent chills down the man's spine. There was something off about the stranger, something that went beyond physical injuries and outward appearance.

"I don't want any problems," the man said. It wasn't until this moment that the man realized he was sorely missing one incredibly important object: a weapon. "I'm just passing through, looking for some food."

The stranger laughed a little too loudly. Saliva trickled down the side of his mouth, but he didn't notice or didn't care. Either way, it made the stranger appear rabid.

"You ain't gonna find no food in here," he said, laughing shrilly again. "Me and my group done searched this whole city like a million times. I searched this store like a hundred times myself. There ain't nothing in here cause I woulda found it by now."

Although Real was clearly frightened by the freakish stranger, he suddenly strayed a few feet to the side. Considering how the

stranger stared at the dog, the man took a few steps over to make sure he stayed close to Real at all times. He didn't want to imagine what would happen if the stranger caught his dog...

"What's that there doggie doing?" the stranger asked.

The man hated to take his eyes off of the stranger but he turned toward Real, who now pawed at a fallen shelf. The stranger came no closer so the man pushed the shelf aside and found a can among the debris. It was one of those meals in a can that needed to be microwaved, an unhealthy dinner that may as well have been filet mignon and lobster for all the man cared. He'd dreamed for years about eating *anything* besides canned fruits and vegetables and beans. He would've celebrated had it only been him and Real, but he remained subdued in front of the stranger, patting Real on the head for a job well done.

"Whatcha got there?"

"I guess you and your people should've looked a bit more," the man said, unzipping his knapsack to add this can with the others.

If this stranger was the brains of his group's searching operation, the man felt better knowing he might find plenty of more stuff out there.

"Well, ain't you the lucky duck?" the stranger said, hobbling a few feet toward them. "But 'round these parts, what we all does is share food with each other. Ain't nobody gets to keep food for theyself."

The man realized he wasn't an intimidating presence himself, but he had little to fear from the stranger physically. But when the odd guy stopped by one of the fallen shelves and picked up a pointy piece of metal, the man suddenly wished for that weapon again. Fortunately, the metal appeared heavier than the stranger could carry in his only workable hand. Still, the man didn't want any trouble and retrieved another can from his pack – one of the old vegetable ones – in case things got ugly.

"Like I said, buddy, I don't want any trouble," the man said, trying to keep the situation from escalating. Apparently, the stranger had mistaken the offer of peace as weakness; a cruel smile appeared

on his lips. Still a good twenty feet away, the stranger was close enough so the man could see his black, rotting teeth. "But where I come from, we say that if you *find* something, you *keep* it. And I don't plan on handing this over."

The stranger laughed again, though there was a disturbing urgency in it that made him sound crazier than ever.

"I don't care 'bout some stupid can of food," the stranger said. "We only worry 'bout finding us some *fresh* meat."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help with that," the man said. "I've been driving across the country for weeks and the only thing scarcer than human life has been animal life. If you want meat, I don't think looking in a city would be the best place for that."

"Maybe you wanna come join our group since you so smart and seen so much stuff," the stranger said. "We could take you in, give you protection and shelter and stuff. It ain't too smart to be out here by yourself, 'specially since there's some nasty people out there."

The stranger spit on the ground and used the sharp piece of metal to pick at his teeth. The man wasn't sure if he felt worse for the stranger or the metal.

"Where do you and your people stay?" he asked.

"Why? You maybe wanna join us? I ain't never got nobody to come join us. I'll show them all that I ain't worthless as they says," the stranger said excitedly.

With every word the stranger spoke, the man felt increasingly pressured to get out of the city before he ran into anyone else. But if he could get more information from the stranger first, he might have a better idea of how quickly he needed to leave.

"Maybe I'll join, but I won't want to say yes until I know more about where your people stay, where *I* might be staying," he said.

"That there's the best part of all this," the stranger said. "I walked like tons and tons of miles and didn't see nothing in one piece 'til I found the only place in probably the whole world that's still not broke. And that's where we all stay, that's where we live with all the guns we use on people who walk in our territory without joining our gang."

If there was ever a moment the man knew he was about to face trouble, this was it. The stranger's group was probably smart enough to keep guns away from this idiot, which meant the man was lucky he ran into him and not one of the stranger's friends.

"This place you talk about sounds incredible," the man said, trying to keep the stranger happy – and more importantly, quiet.

"It *is*. I done wanted to go see Graceland since I been a little kid and now I get to *live* where the King did," the stranger said.

"Graceland? This is Memphis?"

"Where'd you think you's at? Course this is Memphis, best city I ever been to – *only* city I ever been to," the stranger said. "Now you can live with us at the King's mansion. And all you gotta do is give us what we want and you be in our gang, too."

"And what exactly is it that you want?"

"Ain't you been listenin' to me? You just like Old Charlie, he's the one got his ear blown off when the comet hit a few years back. He don't hear nothing we say to him neither," the stranger said.

"I'm sorry, I need to do a better job of paying attention. Could you remind me what you want?"

"Fresh meat, any kinds we can get," the stranger said. "That there dog of yours would be some good eats."

The man might've laughed if he'd thought the stranger was joking. But there was a crazed look in his eyes as he took a few steps forward. The man suddenly realized his earlier concern was right: stopping in this city was the worst decision he could've made. He gripped the can in his hand even tighter, but didn't want to make a move in case the stranger called out to his friends. The man took a deep breath and vowed to apologize to Real later – *if* they made it out of Memphis alive.

"You actually gonna take me in if I give you this mangy mutt?" the man asked, doing his best to impersonate the stranger's accent. "I ain't never seen this dog before I came in this here store. So that sounds like a dang good deal to me."

The stranger's wide smile returned, showing large gaps between his rotted – and *rotting* – teeth.

“That’s great,” he said, turning around and taking a few steps out of the aisle. “Wait ‘til I tell the other fellas how good I did, how I got us more help. Maybe I won’t get stuck diggin’ graves all by myself now. I think the other guys should be out in the streets somewhere.”

“Wait a second,” the man said anxiously. He peeked around the stranger and out of the windows, relieved he didn’t see any other members of the gang. “You can’t go and get everyone just yet.”

“And why can’t I?”

“I told you, this mutt ain’t mine. How you know it ain’t gonna run away before you come back with everyone?” the man asked.

“Good thinkin’, we better just kill it now,” the stranger said.

The man felt his stomach sink at this thought, especially as Real whined while sitting on the floor behind him. The stranger stepped forward with a murderous look in his eyes; there was no doubt he planned to plunge that sharp metal stick straight through Real’s heart. The man had never been in a fight in his life – had never struck anyone out of anger – but all it took was the image of this stranger hurting Real to unleash his inner warrior. Once the stranger was close enough, the man swung his hand with all the rage and anger he could muster, striking the stranger in the head with a sickening thud.

At first, the man was ready to pounce in case the stranger was still conscious and able to call for reinforcements. But it quickly became apparent that the stranger was knocked cold – maybe worse. The man hoped he hadn’t killed him, but he wouldn’t have felt guilty if the stranger died; *nobody* messed with his dog.

“Come on, girl,” he said, petting Real atop his head. “We have to get out of here quick.”

For the first time since owning him, the man wished he had a leash for Real. He hoped Real would stay close, as he’d done so far. The man slowly approached the store’s entrance and peeked out, finding the street deserted. He wanted to kick himself for not prying more information out of the stranger, such as how many ‘friends’ had come with him into the city today. He hoped most of the gang had remained at Graceland and those that had come were in a different part of the city.

“Now I need you to be quiet out here and don’t stray from me.”

The man took a deep breath and hurried out of the store, retreating the same way he’d come. Once he reached the section of street filled with glass, he didn’t give a second thought about the building falling atop him. He merely picked up Real and ran across the glass, which crunched under his heavy boots, possibly the loudest noise he’d ever heard. His head remained on a constant swivel like Real’s had earlier, constantly searching the buildings for any sign of movement.

The man finally put Real down and the two sprinted toward the cross-section of streets, where he turned left. Thankfully, this street also appeared clear and the man allowed himself a brief sigh. They only needed to run down one more city block, get into the car and race back up the ramp and onto the interstate, where he could put as many miles between himself and this city as possible. Having lost the opportunity to find gasoline, the man knew he’d have to find a new car once his tank ran empty, but he no longer felt bad about that. The thought of losing Real made him realize how unimportant material possessions like the car really were.

The man rounded the corner where the red car was parked; what he saw immediately made his heart sink. Nearly a dozen men – the stranger’s friends, all just as dirty and grimy but much larger and armed – surrounded the classic red car, which clearly stood out among the rest of the wreckage. They’d popped the trunk already and were raiding his stash of goods. The man knew there was no way to get those supplies back. But as long as he had the keys – as long as the runt remained unconscious in the food market – the man hoped these strangers would move along so he could get out of the city.

But then, Real started to bark.

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The gang immediately looked up, weapons drawn and ready to fire. The man tried to duck out of the way before he was spotted, but whether they saw him now was irrelevant. The bloodthirsty – and fully loaded – gang already knew Real was out there and the man

wasn't going to abandon his best friend.

He turned and ran down the street, *whistling* for Real to follow. The dog immediately stopped barking and followed, but the damage was already done; the man could hear the group yelling something about fresh meat. Adrenaline exploded through his veins, but his feet still felt weighed down. He realized the only good part of his city tour was going to put his life in jeopardy. Between the oversized leather trench coat and the heavy biker boots, the man was never going to win any sprinting competitions. He doubted he'd make it to the end of the road before being cut down by gunfire.

Knowing the others weren't far behind, the man and Real headed into one of the nearest stores, kicking open the door. The man paid little attention to anything except Real, he noticed posters of exotic locales hanging on the walls in this small store that was once a travel agency. He approached a stairway that might've led to living quarters, but knew he couldn't trap himself in a building just yet. He found the back door to the building and burst into the alley, quickly making the decision to move in the opposite direction of the car. Unless the gang was as stupid as the stranger in the market, the man assumed they'd leave a few people by the car, making the idea of circling around impossible.

The man emerged onto another empty street. Without much time to think, he headed toward the inner part of the city, knowing his best chance for survival was to turn this into a hiding contest. Besides, there was less snow on the ground here so less chance to leave tracks. Still, the man didn't want to risk staying on the streets too long and soon entered another building, cutting through this one as well.

After five minutes of running, he estimated he'd put at least five blocks between him and the car, though he had no idea how far back his pursuers were. The man wanted to keep running until he was certain the others weren't behind, but he was physically unable to keep up the grueling pace. His legs burned and his heart pounded; it felt like his chest would explode at any moment. Running long distances while wearing heavy boots was impossible. He wouldn't

make it much farther until the men caught up. So despite having a dozen armed killers just behind him, the man stopped and sat down on a chair in the lobby of a hotel. He hurried to untie the boot's laces, though two shaking hands made it a difficult task. Once he pulled off the boots, the man felt like he'd dropped a hundred pounds. It would've been nice to have a good pair of running sneakers to replace them.

The man took a final deep breath before heading toward the back of the hotel. Along the way, he tossed the boots behind the hotel's front desk to avoid leaving clues that he'd come this way. For the next hour, the man and Real wove their way in and out of buildings, cutting across the city by traveling down alleys, trying to avoid spending too much time on the streets. Every turn of the corner came with great anxiety, every alley seemed ominously dark. The worst part was that noon was still a hours away; the gang had hours of sunlight left to hunt them. Once the man felt sufficiently confident that he'd lost them – a determination made on the fact that he was sufficiently lost himself – he had to find a place to hide for the rest of the day. Though he didn't know the city or the best way to escape, he figured his only ally for survival would be the dark of night.

He finally decided on an apartment building, one that didn't appear luxurious or particularly well kept. A much nicer building was across the street, but that might've been too obvious a choice. The lobby was in complete shambles and the man was careful where he stepped; he'd already worn holes in his new socks. He found the stairwell and began to climb, deciding that the eighth floor was high enough. Many apartment doors were wide open – *kicked in* was more accurate – and he chose a room at the end of the hall, closest to the other stairwell in case he needed to make a sudden escape.

The inside of this last apartment was fairly intact, yet the man didn't waste time looking around. Though closing his door made this particular apartment different from the others on the floor – thus a possible target if anyone came up here – the man wouldn't be able to rest with the door open. He worked hard to barricade the entrance, pushing and pulling every piece of broken furniture until the living

room was completely empty. Once done, the man finally searched the apartment's other rooms, finding an old pair of sneakers that looked as worn as the pair he'd left behind in the biker shop. Still, he was glad to have them, even if the rest of the clothing scattered about the bedroom was no better than what he already had.

In the kitchen, he found all of the drawers and cabinets wide open and empty. The gang had probably cleared them out ages ago. The man considered checking other apartments on this floor but ultimately decided against it, knowing he'd just be wasting his time. The apartment was dark enough so Real plopped on the thick carpet and closed his eyes, oblivious to the fact that they were in mortal danger. The day's events had taken a lot out of the man and now that he was properly hunkered down, he realized how exhausted he felt physically *and* mentally. He plodded toward the large windows overlooking the city but his view – as well as most of the hazy sunlight – was blocked by ivy that covered the side of this building. The man couldn't see the street below so he tried to open the window and clear the ivy away. But the window had apparently suffered damage beforehand and messing with it caused it to come dislodged. He watched in horror as the glass crashed to the ground eight stories below. The noise was loud enough to wake Real, who barked until the man quieted him down. He looked through the newly made opening and nervously waited for gang members to round the street's corner.

For nearly thirty minutes – long after Real fell back to sleep – the man remained at the open windowsill, watching for any sign of movement, ready to bolt and start running the moment he saw trouble. But Memphis was a big city and the man had apparently done a good job escaping. Once he could relax and didn't feel the need to stare out of the window, he lay on the ground next to Real and discovered how nice it was to feel carpeting again. With the murderous gang somewhere looking for him, the man doubted he'd be able to fall asleep. But after a few minutes, he surprised himself by slipping into a deep slumber...

CHAPTER EIGHT

The man awoke with a start, his subconscious recognizing a noise that shouldn't have been there. He hurried to the window and saw the sun moved to the other side of the sky; he'd been asleep for hours. But surprise quickly turned to dread when he discovered the source of the sound: a large sport utility vehicle driving slowly down the street with four men – three of them armed – walking next to it. Even though the man was eight stories up, it was impossible not to notice the stranger from the market was the gang member without a weapon. The man couldn't make out the words being said among the group but could tell they were still in full search mode, making cursory inspections of many buildings they passed.

He'd been careful selecting this building to hide in but the man was by no means a hunter and didn't know if he left behind any trail. He watched with bated breath as the group approached but another sudden sound behind him made his heart sink. Having also heard impending troublemakers, Real approached the window with teeth bared, his growl low and menacing. It was a sound man only heard from him a few other times but it was always preceded by a bout of a loud barking.

"Shh," the man whispered. "I need you to be quiet, girl."

He stroked Real's back in an attempt to calm him but the SUV suddenly *honked* and a chorus of laughter erupted from the men, as Real's growl returned louder and quicker. The man dove toward the dog's head and quickly clamped his mouth shut just as the first bark rose in his throat. He never had to treat Real so roughly before. But the dog quickly realized that he was bigger and stronger than his master and the man knew he couldn't silence him forever. Therefore, he did the only thing possible to keep him quiet.

"You hungry, girl?" he whispered. There weren't many words Real knew but he had a firm grasp on the English language when it came to any mention of food. His tail wagged excitedly and for a moment, he seemed to forget even growling. But when the SUV *honked* again, he turned back toward the window. "Come on, Real, I

have food for you.”

Thankfully, the man’s knapsack was nearby and he quickly retrieved a can – the same one Real found in the store – and opened it, thus winning the battle for the dog’s attention. With the open can in hand, he jogged toward the bedroom and put the food on the floor, which Real attacked with her usual ravenous hunger. The man closed the door to keep the dog out of earshot and rushed back to the window. When he looked down, he saw the SUV and men stopped below, a few of them examining the glass littering the street. Having seen and stepped on plenty of glass fragments throughout the city, the man felt fairly confident his broken window wasn’t going to give him away. Indeed, the three armed men appeared more interested in the nicer building across the way and paid no mind to the unarmed idiot pointing at the man’s apartment building.

After several minutes, the SUV and men moved on, the sound of their voices and the *honking* fading off down the street. Even though the man heard Real scratching at the closed bedroom door, he left the dog in there for nearly twenty minutes, just in case the gang tried circling around the block to complete another pass. But having guns didn’t make people great thinkers and there was no movement on the street for the rest of the daylight hours. Once the sun began to dip below the city skyline, the man gathered his few belongings, cleared the barricade and proceeded to the building’s top floor, where he had a better view of the entire city and mapped a possible escape route.

“I have no idea how to get back to our car so I think these are worthless now,” he told Real as he jiggled the keys. He didn’t know why but he kept the keys in his knapsack anyway, mixed in with food, water and the letter. “Besides, unless they’re not all fools, they’ll have someone watching the car. We have to move like they have people stationed at all the major points out of the city. If I was them, I’d expect us to hijack a car and try to drive out of here. But unless we find a tank, a car won’t stop them from shooting at us. Our best bet is to head out on foot and *that’s* where we should go.”

The man pointed at a structure in the distance that might have frightened another person, especially since the structure clearly

suffered major damage after the comet strike. But Real loyally wagged his tail; he'd follow his master wherever he went, even if that meant trying to cross a bridge – a *broken* bridge at that.

The man could barely see ten feet in front of him but the city's darkness didn't deter him. If he couldn't see very far, that meant others looking for him couldn't either, making it less likely he'd be spotted.

At least that's what he hoped.

He and Real left the apartment building just after dusk and headed in the direction of the bridge he saw from the top of the apartment building. The man hoped that once they crossed the bridge over the Mississippi River and were out of the city, he could find a car and get as far from Memphis as possible. Now that it was safer for them to travel along the streets, the man and Real made better time and he felt fairly certain they moved in the right direction. Still, every time they reached the end of a street, the man slowly peered around the corner, expecting to find that SUV with its headlights glaring.

“Okay, the coast is clear,” he whispered to Real, even though he could barely see half a city block. “Hey, stop messing with your muzzle.”

The man looked down and saw Real pawing at his mouth, around which he fastened a belt he found in one of the abandoned apartments. It took many tense, slow hours of sneaking around the city but the man finally felt better once he and Real reached the river's edge. Though the hazy sky allowed more sunlight to shine during the day, the moonlight was a different story; barely enough broke through the atmosphere for the man to see across the Mississippi River. Luckily, the bridge's M-shaped arches could be seen in the distance, which he carefully approached.

Through his walk along the river line, he kept an eye out for any type of boat since leaving the city by water would be the last thing the gang expected. But he found no sort of watercraft capable of doing the job and once he reached the bridge, he headed back inland

to find access to the bridge's entrance. He slowly walked toward the nearest highway ramp, thrilled to see a sign telling him which road he was about to enter: I-40 West.

"If I hadn't gotten off the ramp into the city, we probably would've passed here hours ago," the man whispered to Real, who whined within his muzzle. The man hated regretting decisions he made in his life but it was hard not to imagine where he'd be now if he kept going straight on the interstate. With a limited food and water supply in his knapsack, his food situation would be nothing short of dire in a few days – and that was *assuming* he made it out of Memphis alive.

The man slowly approached the toll booths located before the bridge's entrance, over which a tattered sign read "Hernando De Soto Bridge." He worried this would be a perfect place for the gang to set an ambush. He directed Real to the far left of the bridge and tried to stay low as he passed between the last two booths, both of which he was relieved to find empty. He felt a breeze pick up as he walked along the bridge but concentrated too much on the ground to notice much of his surroundings. He walked around a few large cracks in the ground and wished more than ever that he had Real on a leash. But the dog was clumsy only when could afford to be and perfectly navigated the damaged sections of bridge behind his master. As they approached the first of the bridge's large arches, the man knew the worst damaged section was approaching and he prayed he could find his way across.

But Real's sudden growling was a warning that the damaged bridge might not be their only problem.

"What's wrong, girl?" the man asked.

"Step away from the dog and I might not have to shoot you, too," a voice called from the other side of the bridge.

The man felt an icy hand of fear grip his heart as he saw the outline of a person emerge from the shadow of the bridge's arch. Despite his panic, he didn't move away from Real, didn't give this killer a shot at the dog. The man was ready to die for Real, as he knew the dog would be for him.

“We don’t want trouble. We’re just trying to get off your turf without making problems,” he said.

The gang member slowly moved forward. The man saw he wasn’t holding a gun but some sort of hunting crossbow. An accurate shot with a bow would leave the man or Real just as dead but he still didn’t find that thought as frightening as a speeding bullet.

“You don’t want no trouble? That ain’t what Clyde told us when you cracked him in the skull.”

“He was trying to take my dog,” the man argued.

“No, he was trying to get us meat,” the gang member shot back. “And I’m gonna do the same thing, whether I gotta kill you or not.”

As the armed man slowly approached, Real growled louder as the belt around his mouth started to loosen. The man figured his dog could sense danger. But fate stepped in when the crossbowman suddenly stumbled over an unseen crack, his finger slipping as an arrow shot toward them. It whizzed by the man’s head – coming so close that he felt his beard sway in the breeze – but he didn’t bother to lament about how close he’d come to dying. Before the killer had a chance to regain his balance and load another arrow, the man took off, expecting Real would follow him as usual. But when he glanced back, he saw the dog hadn’t followed his lead and was sprinting toward the killer, who just regained his balance. The belt finally slid off Real’s mouth as he was about to attack.

“Real!” the man yelled as he suddenly stopped running just a few feet away from the largest section of the bridge’s damage.

The dog slammed into the gang member, sending him sprawling to the ground, his hunting bow clattering a few feet away. Real never displayed a single moment of ferocity in his life so the man was amazed to see that he knew how to attack so viciously. Real continued to jump on the gang member even as he was on the ground, doing nothing more than covering his face. But he was not a small man and once he figured that the dog wasn’t a threat to his life, he recovered enough to kick Real away.

When the man heard his dog whine in pain, anger exploded in him that he never felt before, not even during all his hours spent

pondering vengeance on his worst enemy. He wanted nothing more than to get his hands on his attacker but the gang member was too far away, already scrambling across the ground to retrieve his crossbow.

“Real! Come on!” he called out, as the dog tried pouncing again but was kicked aside. The man felt a sudden dread that Real would keep attacking until the gang member retrieved his crossbow and had a point blank shot. The dog ignored his commands to come so the man resorted to the only thing Real understood, regardless of how ridiculous it might sound to the gang member. “Who wants to eat? I have your *food*.”

Real’s head suddenly turned at the sound of food and she started to sprint toward her master, as if never in the biggest battle of his life. Once the man knew his dog was coming, he did not wait any longer. He sprinted along the bridge, quickly coming upon the damaged section he had originally hoped to have time to figure out. When he climbed to the top floor of the apartment building earlier and had seen the bridge, it was impossible to miss the large cleft between the two huge arches. The bridge looked like it had been split in two, the large damaged section of concrete hanging at a forty-five degree angle, about to plunge into the water below at any moment. The man had known that by leaving across the bridge, he’d have to deal with this problem; he just didn’t know it would happen so soon.

With moonlight little more than a dimly-lit haze, the man was lucky to see the crack in the darkness. Expecting an arrow in the back at any second, he didn’t slow once he reached the edge, jumping with all his might before seeing how far he’d have to travel. Never an athlete, the man figured he’d land right away. But when several seconds of soaring past, he figured his jump hadn’t been anywhere near enough to reach the other side. At this point, he was moving *down* instead of *forward*, and he thought with dread that the next thing he’d hit would be water hundreds of feet below. But surprisingly, his thoughts weren’t on his own impending doom...

I hope Real somehow escapes...

When he smashed against concrete, the wind was knocked out of his lungs. Before he had the chance to take a deep breath, he felt

his body sliding back and realized he hadn't completely made it to the other side. The man scrambled up the steep incline in spite of his pain, barely able to get a grip on the concrete. As he pulled himself over the edge on the other side of the bridge, he heard a loud *cracking* sound and looked over the edge to see the damaged section dip even lower. A glance up showed the jump about ten feet long and eight feet down to the other side, a distance he'd miraculously survived.

"Real," he tried to call out, though he didn't have enough air in his lungs to sound any louder than a whisper. He took several wheezy breaths before yelling again. "Real!"

Seconds later, the dog stopped at the edge of the bridge.

"Come on, girl, I need you to jump," he called out.

In the distance, he heard the gang member yelling for them to stop and knew he had precious little time. Real hesitated on the other side, so the man immediately ripped the knapsack from his back and pulled out a can of food to lure the dog into action. It worked. Real ran and jumped, soaring through the air more gracefully than the man had done. Real landed next to him and barely stumbled, immediately jumping up at the man's leg to get to the food. The man put the can back into his pack and uttered a quick apology before turning to run.

"Move another inch, I'll shoot you right in the back," the gang member yelled, the sound of his voice closer than the man expected.

The man turned to see the crossbow aimed at him from across the gap in the bridge. There was little doubt the arrow would not miss its mark this time.

"Please, just let us go," the man pleaded. "Pretend like you never saw us, your friends would never have to know."

"I can't do that," he answered. "I told you, give me the dog, leave the city and never come back, and then you could live. If not, I'll shoot you right now and take your dog anyway."

"You'll have to kill me first," the man said.

"So be it."

The man could barely see a thing while on the bridge, but somehow spotted the slightest movement of the gang member's finger on the crossbow trigger. Using reflexes he didn't know he possessed,

the man dove to the side and avoided his second arrow within moments. Unfortunately, Real wasn't so lucky. The man heard the dog yelp. He turned to see the arrow sticking out of his best friend. Real collapsed to his side and the man scrambled to help when he heard running footsteps. He looked back in time to see the gang member leap from the other side of the bridge. Luckily, the crossbowman couldn't jump far either, coming up just short, landing on the edge of the damaged section of bridge. He started to crawl up the incline when a loud *crack* snapped the broken section free.

The gang member yelled in fear, but the man saw his enemy still holding on to the side.

"Help me!" he called out. "You gotta pull me up, man."

Instinctively, the man hurried toward the edge to help. But he barely made it a few feet when Real whined. The man looked at the arrow sticking out of the top half of her back leg.

"Please, you gotta hurry," the gang member yelled with urgency. "I'm slipping."

But when the man turned to look again, he did not feel a shred of mercy or compassion for the person who tried to kill his dog. He ignored the pleas and stayed with Real, looking back in time to see the gang member's fingers slip over the edge of the bridge. The man heard an ungodly scream fading hundreds of feet below until there was nothing but silence. He wouldn't have been surprised if the other members of the gang heard it, so he treated Real's wound as quickly as possible. Thankfully, the arrow hadn't lodged too deeply into the hind leg and he removed it without much complication. He ripped a sleeve off his motorcycle T-shirt and wrapped it around the leg to stop the bleeding.

"I'm sorry, girl, but we have to get out of here before anyone else shows up and starts shooting," he said. "Can you walk?"

Real dutifully tried to stand, but yipped in pain when she put weight on the leg and fell back to the ground.

"It'll be okay," the man said.

He bent over and picked her up, cradling the heavy dog in his arms. It was the second time in as many days that the man carried

her, but he had the feeling it would be for much farther this time. Real slowly turned to look at him and the man saw a great deal of pain in her eyes. Still, she managed to lick his face for several seconds before going limp in his arms. Although the man was tired from the countless miles they'd walked across the city, he ran as fast as he could despite Real's weight, trying to put as much distance as between them and Memphis, Tennessee.

CHAPTER NINE

JUNE 18, 2025

FOUR YEARS, NINE MONTHS, TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS AFTER
IMPACT...

Though it had been years since he last saw a mirror, the man knew without seeing himself that he must've been an odd sight.

A wildly hairy, walking skeleton with the greatest wardrobe man has ever seen, he thought as he walked along the interstate, chuckling to himself, though it sounded more like a cough. He still wore the long trench coat and dark sunglasses he found in the biker shop in Memphis, but the rest of his clothes were totally mismatched, different colors and ill-fitting, taken from various places he'd been over the years. His hair and beard did little to improve his outward appearance. It was little wonder that the few survivors he ran across on his long journey tried to avoid him like the plague, which was just fine with the man considering what happened the first time he found people still alive...

As best he could tell, the man was still somewhere in northern New Mexico. A few days earlier, he passed a sign indicating his location on the map, the first such sign in months. He'd been glad to see the progress he made crossing America; he attained his goal of reaching the Southwestern part of the country. Since then, he'd been on the lookout for any sign of life, hoping his prediction would be correct and that his enemy would find his way to this corner of the world. Realistically, the man knew it would take a miracle to find the individual who'd tried to kill him years earlier, but it was a miracle he lived this long and made it this far so he wasn't about to give up yet.

His feet ached from so many miles of walking and he didn't want to take off his shoes to see what kind of shape his feet were in. Every step was extremely painful and at the moment, he wished for nothing more than a tiny miracle. So when he saw the glint of sunshine reflecting off metal in the distance, he couldn't believe his eyes and wondered if his tired, water deprived mind was playing tricks on him. For the first time in weeks, the man felt a tiny boost of

adrenaline that allowed his pained hobble to turn into a determined limp. It took nearly twenty minutes to cross the distance but he finally reached the silver car, the first automobile he saw for days.

“Looks like it’s in good shape, too,” the man said hopefully, his voice as raspy as a lifelong smoker’s. “Could we possibly be this lucky?”

He opened the door and slid into the driver’s seat, appreciative for the momentary comfort if nothing else. Amazingly, the key was in the ignition but for nearly a minute, he sat in place and did not try the engine, afraid it wouldn’t work yet hopeful for a future that would let him continue his journey behind the wheel of this car. He imagined how far he could travel if this truly was a miracle, if the car started and had a tank full of gas.

Don’t get too excited, the man reminded himself when he felt hope surging through his chest.

He finally turned the key and his heart leapt at the sound of the engine sputtering to life. But as quickly as optimism sprang inside of him, disappointment took over when he saw the needle for the gas gauge dip down to empty. In a moment of frustration, he smashed the steering wheel and caused the car’s horn to *honk*. This sudden noise, in turn, led to a *growling* beside him.

“Calm down, girl, it’s only me,” the man said.

Real gingerly jumped on the man and took his usual spot in the passenger seat. Instead of sitting, though, he leaned to one side, taking as much weight off of his injured hind leg as possible. The man knew he should get out of the car and continue walking; every second he stayed in the seat made it harder to get up. But he couldn’t force his body to get moving, as the only movement he made was to reach over and pull the door closed.

“We’re only going to rest a few minutes, then we have to get going,” he told Real, who already curled up in the front seat and closed his eyes. “There’s still too many hours in the day before we get to rest.”

Even as the man said this, he felt his own eyelids growing heavier, despite only walking for a few hours. The interior of the car

was so comfortably warm – probably in the mid-seventies as opposed to the outside temperature in the fifties – that the man felt he could spend hours in this cocoon of warmth. The sun shined brighter now that most of the haze cleared in the sky and temperatures in this part of the country were significantly warmer than other places the man and Real passed through. It was months since he last saw snow, good in terms of not freezing to death but not so good since it limited his supply of water. Regardless of how cold he'd been during those long months, he never ran out of drinking water as long as there was snow on the ground. Now he traded hypothermia for dehydration and wasn't sure which ailment was worse. He could only be glad that temperatures in New Mexico were still cooler than they used to be.

The man's thoughts turned to his enemy and he forced his eyes open after resting about an hour. His emaciated body still felt so relaxed – or more like so weakened – that he could've drifted back to sleep for many more hours, possibly forever. But he couldn't let that happen so he struggled to open the door, which sucked most of the warm air out of the car. The slight chill invigorated his mind, if not the rest of his body.

“Wake up, Real, we need to keep going,” the man said.

The dog didn't budge until the man patted his side, feeling the dog's ribcage through his thin coat of dull fur. Real opened his sad eyes and slowly turned toward the man, who rubbed his head.

“I know it's tough but we're getting close,” he said, trying to console him. “And we'll eventually find a car that I can get started, I don't know why they've been so scarce around here.”

He never saw Real this depressed before and knew the lack of food and water was affecting the dog more than it was him. Even though he hadn't found a food or water source in weeks – and the land in front of him appeared mostly barren – he knew the time for conserving their limited supplies was over. He opened his knapsack and took out the half-bottle of water and took a long sip before giving the rest to Real, who gladly lapped it up, licking the bottle dry. Real immediately responded to the replenishment and sat up again, his tail wagging when he saw the man take out the remaining can of pears,

which he found months earlier in an abandoned school kitchen. He carefully removed the lid and took out three remaining pears, eating one himself and giving the other two to Real. He allowed Real lick the rest of the syrup from the can.

“Now I better not hear complaints out of you for at least a few days,” he said.

Real promptly licked his face and climbed over him and out of the car. He placed the empty can and bottle back into his pack with the rest of the empties and knew he only had one or two more days to find water before they were in serious trouble. Food and water were scarce throughout their cross-country journey but this was the first time he ever ran out. He got out of the car and continued walking down the empty highway – with Real hobbling beside him – and wondered for the first time if coming to this dry, barren section of country in search of revenge might have been the wrong move...

The man’s previous experience with a large group of survivors had not been positive so he was rightfully nervous every time he came across other humans, expecting them to be nothing short of dog-eating killers. But since every group of people had the potential to include his enemy, the man had to do his due diligence in checking. When he rose over a hill and saw a walled compound in the distance, he knew he’d have to get closer and check what was happening there. Besides, if people were living there then that meant a water source must be nearby, which could help save his life.

“Let’s just hope they don’t shoot us on sight,” the man told Real.

He would’ve preferred waiting until cover of darkness to investigate the type of people living there – gangs parading around with guns and crossbows would obviously be avoided at all costs – but the man and Real didn’t have the luxury of wasting an entire day. Instead, they turned off the road and approached the compound from the surrounding land, expecting the front entrance to be better monitored than the back. But as he got closer, the man didn’t see any

movement inside the compound's wall. The area was larger than first expected – several acres of enclosed space – and had multiple buildings on site. He might've assumed the compound was deserted except that the buildings and surrounding wall were in too good condition to have been around before the comet strike.

Real whined and the man stopped to duck behind a bent tree. The farther he moved from the interstate, the more the landscape changed from desert and sand to patches of green grass.

"I agree," the man said, "something seems strange about this. Someone *has* to be inside those walls."

He peeked around the edge of the tree and an intense light flashed in his eyes, momentarily blinding him. The light was the glint of sunshine reflecting off metal and the man ducked back behind the tree as suddenly as the glint disappeared. Real whined again and this time the man knew why: they were being watched.

"If they wanted to kill us, they could've shot by now," the man rationalized. "We were in the open during our approach, they had a clear view of us. No, I'm sure they're just as afraid of us as we are of them."

The man turned and looked around the corner again. The compound people apparently learned their lesson because he saw no hint of being watched this time. For several moments he scanned the compound but still saw nothing. Knowing they couldn't waste too much time behind the tree, the man finally stood and walked the last few hundred yards toward the wall, praying he wouldn't be shot for approaching.

The wall is a warning to keep out, they won't shoot unless there's a reason to shoot, which I'm certainly not going to give...

The wall was nearly fifteen feet high, bigger than it appeared from far away. The man didn't know what to do – *is there somewhere I can knock to get their attention?* – so he slowly walked around the perimeter in the hope of someone calling out to him. The wall was very tightly constructed of wooden debris and he found only one slight crack he could look through. He saw movement inside and decided to make the first attempt at communication, though he was

ready to turn and run at the first sight of a problem.

“Can anyone in there hear me? Please, I don’t mean you harm,” he called out. “I just want to talk.”

He nearly tripped on a nearby rock – there were tons on the ground just outside the wall – and was about to repeat his message of peace when he heard a noise. Real whined but the man was confused what was inside the compound to possibly make such a loud sound, which magnified in intensity with every second that passed. It quickly became apparent that the *roaring* came from elsewhere – high above them, in fact – and when the man looked toward the sky, he only had to wait a few seconds to discover the source.

At first, his mind assumed the worst and thought he was looking at a second deadly comet streaking across the sky, a fast moving fireball that left a long trail of smoke in its wake. But he soon realized this object was manmade and his heart leapt with the idea that this was an aircraft, that human civilization thrived enough somewhere in this world to launch an impressive aircraft. After years of wondering if the comet reduced the entire globe to a small number of lucky survivors that would eventually die off, this sight lifted his spirits to incredible heights long after the craft disappeared into the distance. When the man finally looked down again, he felt lightheaded and stumbled, tripping over a nearby rock and crashing to the ground. He heard a sickening *thud* a second before feeling pain of his head smashing against another rock. The man tried to stand but was already so weak that it was no surprise when darkness crept across his vision. The last thing he saw before going black was Real, who whined and licked his face. Remembering the danger the dog faced in Memphis, the man willed himself to utter a final command to him before going unconscious.

“Hide.”

The man slowly regained consciousness and felt excruciating pain inside his head. He immediately thought of the comet strike, wondered if he was about to wake up in the underground bunker,

considered the possibility that the last four and a half years of his life never really happened, that his journey across America was simply the most vivid dream of his life...

But when he opened his eyes and forced them to focus, he could immediately tell this was *not* the bunker. He was in some sort of small room, a simple room, sleeping on a mattress for the first time in years. The mattress wasn't exactly soft but after years of sleeping on the ground or in backseats of cars, he may as well have been sleeping on a bed of air. When he suddenly remembered the noise and the aircraft and the compound and his fall, the man sat up quickly; he would've jumped out of bed had it not been for a dizzy spell that threatened to sink him back into unconsciousness.

He sat on the edge of the bed for several minutes, concentrating on taking deep breaths so he wouldn't pass out. The man saw a large glass of water sitting on the tiny wooden table next to the bed – the only other piece of furniture in the small room – and he wondered if he should trust whoever put it there for him. Figuring he had nothing to lose, he picked up the glass and chugged the entire thing, not stopping to breathe a single time until the water was gone. With a stronger feeling of life flowing through him, he found the strength to stand and quietly crossed the room to where his clothes were folded neatly on the floor. The man quickly dressed and looked out the small window, seeing a view of the compound from inside the walls. He desperately searched the surrounding grounds for Real but saw no trace of his dog.

Determined to find Real – even if it meant fighting through however many people lived inside this compound – the man rushed into the hallway. But he barely walked a few feet when he ran into the burly chest of a large, imposing man dressed totally in black. One look at this large stranger's badly scarred face was enough to sufficiently worry the man.

"I'm glad to see you're awake," the burly man said, his voice so soft and friendly that it didn't seem right coming out of his mouth.

"I need to find my dog," the man said frantically, trying to push his way past the immovable force in front of him. "What did you do

with him?"

"Calm down, my friend, I assure you, your dog is just fine," the stranger said. "He's safe at the moment, just like you. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions."

The large stranger seemed respectful and friendly but had a demeanor of authority that the man immediately recognized, one that went well beyond his sheer size.

"I'm not big into conversations," the man said.

"I just want to know a few things, like your name, where you're from, what you've seen, how you've gotten here," the stranger said. "As I'm sure you probably discovered about the outside world, not everyone is law-abiding now that there's no order. I don't like to give anyone free reign of my facility until I know more about them."

The man realized the scarred stranger wasn't *asking* these questions as much as kindly *demanding* answers, which he could totally understand considering the type of people he'd also run into. Though he remained panicked every second apart from Real, the man quickly summarized everything the stranger wanted to know. But he barely finished before hearing the distinct sound of Real barking somewhere in the distance, a noise that instantly ended their conversation.

"What are you doing with my dog?" the man asked, pushing past the larger stranger.

He rushed down the narrow hallway while barely noticing how many doors he passed along the way. The man followed the sound of Real's barking, which led him down a long flight of steps and beyond quite a few strangers who stared openly at him. The others here looked far more normal than the man – for that case, far more normal than the large scarred man – but that didn't mean they could be trusted, that didn't mean they weren't up to something terrible with Real.

"Just calm down, friend," the scarred man said from behind, his heavy footsteps following.

The man burst through the door and onto the grounds, where he saw Real running nearby. But the dog wasn't in trouble the way the

man had expected; in fact, he was running after a stick, which he picked up and returned to three children. They were playing fetch, a game the man never played with Real but one he seemed to have picked up quickly.

“I told you, friend, everything is okay,” the scarred man said. “We’re not about hurting anyone here. This is a place of peace.”

The man calmed a bit but still *whistled* for Real, who hurried over by his side to the disappointment of the children. Despite the strangely dressed newcomer to the compound, the three kids approached and started to pet Real, who relished the extra attention. The group was soon joined by another dozen people who emerged from the barn, most hesitant to engage the man in conversation. But the scarred man was different and did not hesitate to speak.

“You ran off before I could tell you my name. I’m Pastor Michael O’Connor but everyone here calls me Pastor Mike, or just Mike if you aren’t a religious man.”

Pastor Mike held out his hand, which the man promptly shook. This seemed to relax some of the others.

“I asked you quite a few questions earlier so it seems fair that I give you *my* answers to those questions,” Pastor Mike said. “Like everyone else, I barely survived the day of the comet strike. I pleaded with my people to join me in a cave near my church but very few joined me. It was truly a miracle that the wave of fire didn’t completely consume me the way it did everyone else but as I’m sure you can see, I didn’t go totally unscathed.

“After burying my friends, I lived alone in that cave for years, surviving off the meager supplies I brought. Like any man, I questioned why God chose me to survive when everyone else around me died; I freely admit that there were many times over those years that I wished God *had* taken me, too. I was alone, my injuries left me in constant pain, I was freezing and I was starving. But even worse than loneliness and physical pain, I was confused and angry about why I’d been spared and so many others hadn’t.

“Once the skies cleared and the temperatures improved, I left the cave and started to walk, started to look for answers to the

questions I had about my life and the reason for my existence. For months I walked, half-dead and afraid, still confused. But then one day, I came across the remains of this farmhouse and barn and inside, I found a huge cache of the seeds of life. Tired of aimlessly wandering, I decided to stay here and make this my home, to start fixing this place. I found no survivors in this area but plenty of supplies in the form of debris from shattered homes. Every day I pray for those whose lives and homes were destroyed and hoped I did them proud by raising this place from their ashes.

“The building was slow going at first. I might be a bigger man but my construction experience was limited and the progress – if you could call it that – was gradual. Again, I prayed that I made the right decision to stay but God answered those prayers once the others started to show up. It was only a few people at first – Jeff and Maria – but Jeff was a construction worker and with his help, this building started to take shape. Over the weeks, more people began to show up – *good* people as opposed to some of the... let’s just say *not-so-good* people. Based upon your reaction to first meeting me, I’m sure you’ve learned a thing or two about those kinds of people on your journey.”

The man looked at some of the others and saw many of them nodding.

“Yes, I know about them,” he said.

“God blessed me and these people and this place and within a year, we were done construction on our second building,” Pastor Mike said, pointing to a building next to the barn that was just as large. He then pointed to a much smaller one at the far end of the compound. “We even have ourselves a mechanic here and a pretty nice storage of automobiles in an underground garage. So there’s a lot of good things here, which obviously makes us a target for vultures and hooligans. God sent me so many good folks that I had stars in my eyes and started to assume this place was invulnerable to bad things going on out there. But in His infinite wisdom, God tested our resolve when two men attacked us and tried to take what we worked so hard to build.

“As a man of God, I tried to avoid violence at all cost but that was impossible. We fought with a ferocity that I never knew such

good people could possess and God allowed us to vanquish evil. But that's when we put the rest of our projects on hold and constructed the wall. It was not an easy task but every person helped, including the children."

"We carried wood and got water for everyone," said a little girl, who continued to pet Real.

"It provides us an extra level of protection and allows us to see far into the distance," the pastor said. "That's how we spotted you coming from so far away and readied ourselves in case you brought trouble. But I can tell you're a good person, like the rest of us here. And if you're willing to work hard and fight to keep this place safe from invaders, we'd be more than happy to let you stay as long as you'd like. It looks like the kids have already taken quite a liking to your dog, too."

"What's her name?" a little boy asked the man.

The man had trouble totally trusting these people but reminded himself that they'd taken him and Real into the compound, already had plenty of opportunity to harm both of them. Besides, if there were anyone left in the world for the man to put his trust in, it would be a man of God and a couple kids.

"Actually, she's a he and his name is Real," he told the kids.

"That's cute," the little girl said.

"Can Real play with us some more?" the boy asked, holding up the stick that he'd been fetching. "I promise we won't hurt him."

The man looked down at Real, whose tail wagged in anticipation of playing fetch. Never before had the man thought he'd have children in his life but he suddenly felt like an overprotective parent hesitant to let his little boy play with other kids.

"Okay but just be careful with him," he said. "He still has an injured back leg."

With Real hobbling after the children, the other adults dispersed into the compound, most heading toward the next building over. He watched one particular man walk to the other side of the walled-in area and disappear into the ground.

"I know that staying can be a difficult decision for some people,

especially after being on the roads for so long,” the pastor said once they were alone. “So I don’t expect you to decide anything now. Was there somewhere in particular you were headed?”

The man wasn’t prepared to tell anyone about his enemy and didn’t think a pastor would appreciate the vengeful thoughts that had fueled his journey.

“Just trying to head toward the coast,” the man said. “Figured that would be the warmest place, maybe a lot of others would be going there.”

“I’ll tell you one thing: you won’t find the same coast from before the strike. We’ve heard several reports that almost all of California – especially Southern California – is underwater,” the pastor said. “But I understand why you’d want to go there. And if you still decide to head west, I suggest you stay with us for a few days, recharge your battery before continuing on. Why don’t you come in and eat something? If you’re anything like your dog, you must be starving.”

“You fed Real already?” the man asked.

“I hope that’s okay,” the pastor answered. “We obviously don’t have dog food but he didn’t seem to mind eating human food.”

The man looked at his dog running around the compound with more energy than he’d seen in years.

“You’re sure you have enough to spare?” the man asked.

The pastor smiled and waved him back inside.

“We might seem like a simple operation from the outside – an image we’re more than happy to portray – but we have a lot more than we let on,” the pastor said.

“Do you know anything about the aircraft that flew overhead earlier?” the man asked.

The pastor shook his head.

“Unfortunately, I was going to ask you the same question,” he said. “We hear a lot of rumors about what’s happening in different parts of the country but *nobody’s* ever mentioned anything about aircraft. Either way, that craft looked like it was in trouble and was probably going to crash somewhere. Considering its speed and

declining altitude, I'd guess it touched down about a hundred or so miles east of her. I considered sending a search and rescue party to see if there were any survivors that needed help."

The pastor led him to a small kitchen area, where there were several baskets full of fruits and vegetables.

"A hundred miles? It would take a rescue party weeks to walk that far," the man said. "I don't think they'd be much help at that point."

"Who said anything about walking?"

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The man never had much of a family growing up and always seemed to surround himself with people that never had his best interests in mind. But over the next several days, he felt welcomed at the compound, amazed by what the pastor and his people had done to become so self-sufficient. This place truly seemed a starting spot for the development of society and a part of the man wanted to stay in the safety of these four walls, to stay where food and water weren't scarce, where he and Real wouldn't have to worry about starving.

But every night before he fell asleep, the man's thoughts returned to the person who tried to kill him. He felt himself growing softer with every passing hour he spent at the compound and didn't want his revenge-fueled fire to extinguish, knowing he could never properly rest until he did what he had to do. He finally woke up before dawn one morning and fed Real a nice meal before sneaking out of the compound's main dormitory. He crossed the compound and was surprised to find the pastor waiting by the entrance.

"I've been waiting out here the last few mornings," the scarred man said. "I'm surprised it's taken you this long to leave."

The pastor held out a bag of food and water.

"How do you know I didn't already help myself to supplies?" the man asked.

"Because I sensed you were a good man, not a thief," the pastor said. "After you take care of whatever it is waiting for you out there, I hope you'll want to find your way back and take up my offer to stay."

Despite everything bad that happened over the years, this was the first time the man could remember his eyes becoming misty. He shook hands with the pastor, who lightly patted Real on the head before opening the entrance.

“I’ll look forward to coming back,” the man said.

“Good luck.”

With that, the man and Real left the compound’s walls and stepped back into the world. But they didn’t have to walk far. A car was parked just outside, its door open, keys in the ignition and tank full of gas. Before he had the chance to turn around and thank the pastor, the man heard the entrance to the compound close. Instead, he got into the car, leaned across the passenger seat and rolled down the window for Real.

PART TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TEN

JUNE 18, 2025

FOUR YEARS, NINE MONTHS, TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS AFTER
IMPACT...

“Can anyone see anything else?”

Dozens of people stood together, still searching the sky for any other sign of smoke, any indication that the first aircraft that flew overhead would be joined by another. But there was no more *roaring* above, the only noise coming from the soft splashing of ocean waves against the shores of Arizona.

“I think that’s about it for the air show, folks,” Ben Coleman told his people, though he stopped looking five minutes earlier. “But if I’m not mistaken, that craft was headed in the direction of Lehigh so hopefully we’ll find civilization along the way. Now we have to concentrate on our next move.”

Like always, the mention of Lehigh elicited cheers from the group. The positive reaction was a good sign that the group still held a belief in Ben’s ability to lead them, something he figured they might be questioning. After all, the group learned just minutes earlier that their frantic evacuation of the seacraft was the result of a clever ploy by some of the boat’s unhappy inhabitants. Ben was clearly made a fool of but the fact that Tyler Ainsworth was also duped made him feel better about himself.

Coleman couldn’t get enough of seeing Ainsworth’s misery and stole another glance toward the shore, where the *former* seacraft owner still remained in one of the lifeboats, staring toward the empty spot in the water where his craft dipped below the surface moments earlier. Originally, Ben had every intention of sinking the seacraft and forcing Ainsworth to watch it go under for the last time. But he took nearly as much satisfaction knowing the craft would sail on without Tyler aboard, a fact that clearly devastated the murderer. The only unfortunate part was that the person who pulled the trigger – Nikki Jones – that killed Ben’s sister was still aboard the seacraft and would never face proper punishment she deserved.

But Ben had the well being of his people to focus on and knew any true leader couldn't put his personal feelings above the best interests of the whole group.

"I think our plan is a simple one, one that has been pre-determined for us by fate," Coleman told the group. "We follow the path of the aircraft, head in the same direction in the hopes of finding wherever the craft was going. Obviously, we'll stick to major highways and interstates and travel during daylight hours. I see no reason why we shouldn't reach Kansas as quickly as possible."

"I'm not sure it'll be as easy as you think," Colin McKay said. Though Colin was viewed by others as a leader like Ben, he usually didn't mind hanging back and ceding control to his friend. But this was a subject he had more experience considering his mad dash up the Western coast years earlier. "I witnessed firsthand the chaos and lawlessness that ran rampant during Earth's final days. If there are survivors – *violent* survivors – we might be better off taking the trip slowly, staying on less populated back roads, traveling at night with the cover of darkness."

Colin's warning was met by nervous nods from a few, none more so than his girlfriend, Heather Sanders. The beautiful Hollywood actress heard all about Colin's trip from Southern California to Northern Washington in the days before the seacraft left, about how the world fell into complete pandemonium, about the way Colin was car-jacked and almost killed. It was enough to make her nervous about traveling too far inland. Ben also heard the same story but didn't seem quite so worried.

"In case you haven't noticed, *all* of California is underwater," Coleman pointed out. "Therefore, I doubt too many survivors – good *or* bad people – are around this area. Besides, we have a bigger group than any band of survivors I can imagine. There's something to be said for safety in numbers and we certainly have numbers on our side. I don't think anyone here wants to wait longer to get back to Lehigh."

"I don't understand needing to rush such a decision," Colin said. "We could just as easily stay in this area a while until we gauge what type of world we're about to live in."

“Stay *here*?” Ben asked, sweeping his arm across the horizon, which contained nothing but empty, open land and a few areas of debris. “There’s nothing for miles except trash. I don’t think there’s anything to learn except how crucial it is that we get back to our homes.”

The group took strength and confidence from their leader and it was clear that Colin’s concerns were being pushed aside by the majority. Not wanting to fight a losing battle in front of the group – which would accomplish nothing more than undermining Ben’s authority – Colin ended his opposition and blended back in with the crowd. After all, if the group was going to leave as soon as Ben suggested, Colin and Heather had some quick – and very important – decisions to make.

“What should we do?” Heather asked quietly.

Originally planning to remain in California once they reached America, Colin and Heather’s plan was obviously washed away along with their homes and cities. They no longer had any place to return to, which left them with few options.

“I guess we stay with the group for now,” Colin said, looking around at the barren landscape, seeing nowhere that he and Heather could live happily. “We can see the condition of the rest of the land and maybe find a better place to settle. Ben is right about safety in numbers, at least if other survivors aren’t well armed.”

Heather was clearly disappointed; she’d never gotten along well with the former lower level passengers – especially Ben, who made no secret of his dislike for her. But Heather was a reasonable woman and knew when she had to put personal feelings aside.

“Okay, everybody! I’m not sure how much daylight we have so I suggest making good use of it,” Ben called out to the group. “It’s time to move out.”

With a last look toward the ocean – where they spent the last four and a half years – the group began to walk inland. Colin and Heather stayed near the back along with Ben, who oversaw the entire group. Once it was almost their turn to follow, Colin looked back at the lifeboats, where the last two seacraft survivors remained.

“Tyler! You and Earl better get over here unless you want to be left behind,” Colin called out over the sound of waves.

Tyler didn’t budge but Ben certainly did.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Coleman asked angrily, the closest he’d ever come to yelling at Colin. Many in the group heard anger from their leader and immediately realized what was happening. For the first time, Colin understood how awkward Heather felt in Ben’s presence; *everyone* in the crowd gave Colin the same dirty look that Ben reserved for Heather. “I never said Ainsworth was invited to join us. Actually, I’ve repeatedly stated the exact *opposite*.”

Colin knew all along that the moment would come when Ben forced Tyler to separate from the group. But now that the moment was here, he felt guilty about leaving people behind, regardless of whether his brain told him it was a just punishment. Even though Ainsworth planned to retake control of his seacraft after helping fake a disaster, he *had* worked tirelessly to get the seacraft to safety and that counted for something as far as Colin was concerned.

But apparently, he was the *only* one who thought that way.

“But on their own, the two are as good as dead,” Colin argued.

“And that’s *exactly* what a traitor deserves,” Ben said.

Though Ben often showed a propensity for vengeance – even if that meant lowering himself to his enemy’s level – his malevolence still surprised Colin every time it surfaced. Ben must’ve noticed his friend’s disappointment because he quickly softened his stance, at least in regards to one of the condemned men.

“You can come if you want,” he told Earl, who remained next to Ainsworth’s craft, looking like a lost puppy. “But *not* him.”

Earl looked at Ainsworth, who appeared totally devastated. Earl didn’t know if he could get Tyler to budge an inch. The small man looked longingly at the crowd, which slowly filtered away from the shore.

“You should come with us,” Colin pleaded, not wanting to feel responsible for the deaths of *two* people. “You’ll have a much better shot at lasting longer out there.”

Earl eventually shook his head.

“I can’t do that, I can’t leave him.”

Colin tried to think of words to convince him but soon felt Heather pulling at his arm.

“Come on, we have to go, too,” she said as the rest of the group headed out.

Colin sighed and allowed himself to be dragged away. After a few minutes, he glanced back a final time, knowing this would be the last time he ever saw Ainsworth.

“I know you might not believe this but I agree with Ben about this,” Heather said. “I’m glad that we’ll never see Ainsworth again.”

Earl Ackerman stared at the group as they walked away, worrying that his best chance of surviving was also disappearing into the distance. Colin McKay and Heather Sanders rounded out the group and it wasn’t long before Heather’s long blonde hair was nothing more than a speck on the horizon. More than once, Earl considered running after them, joining the group to increase the likelihood of living longer in this unknown world. But even though he knew Ainsworth would have no trouble abandoning him if their situations were reversed, Earl remained by his side. It wasn’t until a wave reached Earl’s feet and drenched his shoes that he looked away from the seacraft passengers.

“Now what?” he asked.

He assumed that Ainsworth’s shell-shocked demeanor was simply some sort of ploy to garner sympathy from Ben and the other passengers, a ploy that might convince others to let them join the group. But Tyler’s ‘act’ continued long after the group was gone and Earl realized he’d been left behind with someone utterly distraught and broken. He was so used to Ainsworth being relentlessly forceful that he didn’t know how to act now that Tyler was in a catatonic state.

“I need you to *snap out* of this,” Earl yelled. He kicked the lifeboat so hard that Tyler’s elbow’s jarred loose from the side of the raft, causing Tyler to nearly tumble into the rising tide. With water

splashed in his face, Ainsworth seemed to snap out of his dazed reverie and Earl expected a tongue-lashing.

“This has to be a test,” Tyler mumbled.

“A test?” Earl asked. “What are you talking about?”

“A test, you fool, a *test*,” Tyler said firmly, jumping out of the raft, splashing water without a care. “What part of that don’t you understand?”

Earl didn’t understand *any* part of what Ainsworth was talking about but he was glad to see the man moving around. Unfortunately, Earl didn’t stay happy for long and only became more confused when Tyler started to push the raft back toward the water.

“What are you doing?” Ackerman asked, grabbing the edge of the lifeboat to stop Ainsworth from going any farther.

“You idiot, either let go of the raft or help push it back into the water,” Ainsworth ordered, sounding more like his usual self. Earl finally relented and dragged his end of the raft toward the surf. “Now get in if you want me to explain.”

Ainsworth hadn’t looked at a paddle let alone used one on the ride to shore but he immediately climbed across the raft and started to row, without giving Earl a moment to ponder what to do. Losing his seacraft could’ve left Tyler suicidal, a risk Earl admittedly bit far-fetched. In the end, Earl decided he didn’t have much to lose and splashed through a few feet of water to jump aboard.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“This is a test from BJ,” Tyler said as he paddled farther into the ocean. “They changed the plan at the last moment and expected us to figure out that they’d come back. It’s a test to see if we have faith in them.”

“I don’t know, Tyler, they seemed to want you gone from the craft,” Earl said. “They seemed to want *both* of us gone.”

“You never should’ve let them kick us off,” Tyler fired back. “If they hadn’t knocked me cold, *I* would’ve found a way to stay aboard. That’s what I get for aligning myself with someone as spineless as you. Now are you going to sit there or are you going to help me row?”

As unlikely as it was that the seacraft would rise to collect them

– especially since there was zero sign of *anything* showing up on the surface – Earl helped with the rowing, all the while pondering if he made a colossal mistake by staying with Tyler.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

John Fare did not watch a single moment of President Marshall's broadcast to the space station, during which time he apologized for the trickery involved in *Destinee's* departure. Unfortunately, John already knew about leadership's deception and had trouble focusing on anything but his desperate search for his fiancée, Emily Peterson. A part of him knew his search was an exercise in futility; he was certain she'd somehow gotten onto *Destinee*, regardless of not being on the passenger list. He saw her heading to that section of station and found her hair tie floating above the airlock to the ISU craft. But he refused to give up his search until he checked every square inch of the station, every room where she possibly sneaked into.

"Has anyone seen Emily?" John asked a group of passengers gathered in the hallway, angrily discussing the president's latest deceit. A few apparently recognized panic and grief on John's face.

"No, we haven't seen her," one answered. "Is everything okay? Did something happen to her?"

These weren't the first people to question John about Emily's well being. While he'd blown off the others, he reached a point where he wanted help looking for her, he wanted to vent his own frustration about what he thought happened.

"I think she somehow got aboard *Destinee*," he said. "The president said she wasn't supposed to but I can't find her anywhere and I saw her heading into *Destinee's* hallway during the staged oxygen leak."

The group was appalled to hear such news, which added fuel to their fire against those that constantly lied to them. Even though Emily led a quiet life aboard the station, those who knew her obviously sensed she was good a person; they were rightfully disgusted by the fate that she – and John – suffered. As he continued to float down the hallway – pounding on doors and asking others if they'd seen her – an angry crowd gradually formed behind him, helping him look while whipping themselves into a fury.

It would've been impossible for John to avoid hearing the ruckus growing behind him but he was so lost in his own thoughts that he hardly focused on the group. Not until he ran into a few of the station's remaining Marines – who appeared simultaneously angry and nervous – did he realize the significance of what was happening around him.

"I need you to return to your room, John," one of the Marines said. "We need *everyone* to calm down and return to their rooms."

"I can't do that," John answered, grief giving him a new level of bravery he never had before. "My fiancée is missing, I think she might've gotten aboard *Destinee* somehow. There are still places aboard the station I need to check and I'm not going to stop."

"There are ways of going about looking but forming a mob *isn't* one of them," the Marine said.

"We're *helping* him," somebody from the crowd called out. "And we wouldn't have to do that if we weren't constantly lied to."

Cries of agreement rang out from the crowd.

"Now please get out of our way so we can keep searching," John said. "I only have a few sections of the station left."

The Marine obviously misinterpreted John's grief for weakness and roughly grabbed him to show his physical superiority.

"Believe me, kid, you don't want this to get out of control," the Marine yelled. "Now go back to your room and await further instruction or I'll drag you back there myself."

John tried to push the bigger man off him but the Marine had an iron-clad grip and wouldn't let go. But the man's aggressiveness only intensified the anger from the crowd, which suddenly surged forward. Within seconds, John and the few Marines were inundated with people and John felt the man's grip on his shirt loosen. The situation exploded into a free-for-all that John hadn't intended. He broke free from the mass of bodies and continued into the next hallway, continued searching for Emily with the help of nearly half the station's remaining passengers close behind. Had he not been so singularly concerned with finding Emily, he probably would've swelled with gratitude for the support of all these people.

Unfortunately, he could've had a million people helping and it wouldn't have made a difference. John and his group eventually reached the last hallway without success and he knew for certain that Emily was gone. As he floated in front of the airlock to one of the docked shuttles, John's panic and worry suddenly transformed to anger. He wanted nothing more than to break into this shuttle and somehow fly it back to Earth, chase after *Destinee* and find Emily wherever she might've ended up. The crowd – nothing short of raucous the whole time – was now respectfully quiet and morose as they realized Emily was irretrievably lost. When John turned to face them, everyone stared at him in silence, anticipating that he'd address them.

"She's not here," he said through gritted teeth. He nearly choked on the words but somehow stayed strong.

Many in the crowd shook their heads but none dispersed as John expected.

"Now what do we do?" someone called out.

That was a question John didn't have the answer to, as the only possibility of getting back to Emily could be viewed as a suicide mission. Still, dozens of passengers squeezed into the tight hallway and looked expectantly at John, as though he was some kind of leader. Whether this was a situation he was comfortable with or not, John only had one response on what he wanted to do, though he figured to receive quite a few crazy looks.

"We should take this shuttle and head back to Earth," he said, waiting for a collective shake of the head from the group. But much to his surprise, that didn't happen. Instead, he saw some of the people looking around and whispering to one another, a few even nodding in agreement.

"Yeah, we shouldn't keep waiting for Marshall and Mansfield to tell us what to do," somebody else said. "They'll only keep lying to us anyway."

"I've wanted off this station for months!"

"Me, too! Earth looks green enough for us to return," another agreed. "Had they told us the truth about *Destinee's* mission, I

would've been first in line to volunteer.”

Within seconds, everyone in the crowd seemed to voice his or her approval for the idea of leaving, which came as a shock to John. But as opposed to feeling hopeless and helpless about losing Emily, the support of so many people – all who seemed aboard for taking drastic action – invigorated him; he tried to figure out exactly how they could escape on this shuttle.

“How can we do this?” someone asked.

“Well, the first – and most obvious – thing would be finding a pilot for the shuttle,” John said. “And I think I have the perfect candidate.”

Although there was nothing about this situation that John could find happiness about, a part of him felt glad that he would finally make Marshall and Mansfield pay for their constant lying.

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“You can’t keep lying to people and not expect them to retaliate in some form,” Lily Edwards yelled.

“Retaliate?” Peter Mansfield asked incredulously. “I *highly* doubt they’re capable of doing anything to harm us.”

Lily and Mansfield were joined in the station’s control room by President George Marshall and Slava Kovalchuk, both of whom stayed out of the argument between the station’s two biggest hotheads. Despite the president’s confession to the station about the *Destinee* lie, Lily couldn’t accept that the secret was kept from her and everyone else. As far as she was concerned, this was the end of her patience and forgiveness, which she did not bother to hide.

“I wouldn’t underestimate what *anyone* aboard this station could do with proper motivation,” Lily shot back. “And you can count me among that motivated group who’s sick and tired of being lied to and won’t take it lying down anymore.”

“Are you aware of the punishment for threatening the president?”

Mansfield was clearly challenging Lily but she was never one to back down, especially not to him.

“*You* aren’t the president,” she said before turning to Marshall. “And no offense, sir, but I think anyone aboard the station could defeat you if we had an election today.”

The president slowly nodded. Part of Lily felt bad since Marshall suddenly appeared so old and defeated, undoubtedly the result of years of difficult decision-making. But at the same time, she couldn’t feel *that* bad knowing Marshall allowed Mansfield to have so much impact – so much *negative* impact at that – on many of those decisions.

Before their argument could continue, everyone shut up when they heard the light crackle of communications equipment. Instantly, they turned to face the radio and prayed that *Destinee* was attempting to call them. The station lost radio contact with the spacecraft thirty minutes earlier, soon after *Destinee* radioed that they were making their final approach toward Earth’s uneven terrain. Based upon what they heard in those final seconds – and the subsequent radio silence that followed – it was hard to imagine a good fate for the ISU craft. That was why they all felt a rush of excitement to hear the burst of static and became equally disappointed when they realized it didn’t come from the control room’s radio. Instead, Mansfield pulled a walkie-talkie from his back pocket, surprised to be receiving a call.

“This is Mansfield, what do you want?”

Lily nearly wondered aloud how Mansfield maintained his few allies when he spoke to them in such a disrespectful manner. But she bit her tongue and listened to the frantic report from the Marine.

“Sir, we have a serious situation in the hallways,” the Marine said. “Passengers have banded together and are on a warpath. We tried to stop their leader but the crowd overwhelmed us and I didn’t want to get too rough with them until I had orders.”

Lily smiled condescendingly, her prediction of a few minutes ago already coming true.

“What is the crowd doing? Where are they going?” Mansfield asked, the hint of nervousness in his voice.

“We’ve been following them since they got past us and they’ve stopped in one of the corner pieces,” the Marine reported. “I don’t

know what they're up to but the group seems to be passionate about following their leader."

"Their leader?" Mansfield asked. "Who is that?"

"It's John Fare, sir," the Marine said.

Lily was shocked and based on the expressions of the three other men in the control room, she wasn't the only one. Having deduced that his fiancée – who he was supposed to marry the next day – somehow managed to board *Destinee*, John burst out of the control room moments after the last communication with the craft. To be able to band together so many people so quickly was a complete surprise, one that Mansfield clearly didn't appreciate as much as Lily.

"Do whatever you need to do to shut him up," Mansfield ordered the Marine.

"What?" Lily asked angrily. "You can't do that. Mr. President, you can't let him do that."

"I want him detained by any means possible, even if it means getting ugly with the crowd," Mansfield continued. "Just get the job done. Out."

"Are you crazy? What do you expect John to do? He's only reacting to having his fiancée ripped away from him!" Lily yelled. "And that happened because of you two!"

"Emily Peterson wasn't supposed to go," the president said quietly, as if hesitant to get involved. "She was never on our list. That wasn't supposed to happen."

"But it *did* happen and now you're going to punish John for *your* deception?"

"That's not your decision to make, it's *ours*," Mansfield argued back. "And you better not get in our way this time the way you did with Wesley Maddox."

For the briefest of moments, Lily felt like she'd been punched in the stomach and all the fight in her evaporated. She never actually admitted to helping Wesley hide all of those years – with his death on the moon, neither Marshall nor Mansfield ever fully questioned her. But now that Mansfield was firing low blows, Lily was done pretending like she had nothing to do with helping Wesley. With one

simple comment, Mansfield ignited a flame within Lily that she never knew could burn so hot.

“*You* gave the order to leave Wesley locked in a pod that you knew was going to be ripped free from the station,” she yelled. “*You* wanted to condemn him to death even though he was only protecting the president. It wasn’t fair and I wasn’t going to let it happen.”

“You might blame *me* for all of that but Maddox died because of *you* so I guess your help didn’t do him any good,” Mansfield said.

Something went off in Lily’s mind that took away her ability to continue fighting – at least with her words. A burst of energy exploded down her arms and Lily immediately pushed off the wall and shot toward Mansfield, fully intending to rip the cocky man limb from limb. Fortunately – at least for Mansfield – Slava knew Lily well enough to recognize the anger and sensed the impending attack before Lily launched herself. He intercepted her inches from Mansfield, who instinctively cowered in terror. For a few seconds, Lily fought to break free from the Russian’s grip until her mentor calmed her down and led her to the control room door.

“Go and calm down,” Slava told her soothingly.

Lily might have stopped fighting but her anger did not subside one bit.

“You’re going to pay for what you’ve done to everyone, I promise you that,” she threatened Mansfield as she stormed out of the room. Mansfield smartly remained quiet until Lily was gone.

“That sort of behavior is unacceptable,” the Chief of Staff said once it was the three of them remaining.

“You were a bit harsh on her, Peter,” the president said, his voice not much louder than a whisper. He was still as stunned by Lily’s outburst as the others. “You didn’t have to say those things about Maddox. I understand why she became so infuriated, just like I understand why John Fare is so angry – not to mention everyone else aboard the station.”

“With all due respect, Mr. President, now is not the time for understanding,” Mansfield said as he removed the walkie-talkie from his back pocket again. He pushed the TRANSMIT button and demanded

an update from the Marines.

“We’re about to enter the corner piece and apprehend Fare,” the Marine said.

“Also be advised that Lily Edwards has gone rogue and I think she’s in cahoots with Fare,” Mansfield explained. “She’s just as likely to incite a riot among the people so I’d like her found and detained, too.”

“Copy that, sir.”

Mansfield felt better knowing that he would ultimately defeat Lily, regardless of how angry she might be. He joined the president in their usual position in front of the control room’s large window, as they silently looked out at the Earth below. Neither leader saw Slava slowly shaking his head with displeasure.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In less than a minute, the helicopter carrying every remaining inhabitant of the underground bunker disappeared into the clouds, the *whirring* of its rotors fading into the distance.

Well, I guess not every remaining person, Andrew Brighton thought.

Andrew felt a total sense of solitude now that he and his family were in the middle of a Russian mountain range, a spur of the moment decision made a few minutes earlier. While his son had already been aboard the chopper, Andrew was surprised when his wife approached him and mentioned the possibility of remaining in Russia. Katina never said anything about staying before and Andrew knew the decision should've been a hard one to make. But it was something he thought about over the weeks nearly as much as AJ did and he didn't hesitate to agree with his wife. Seeing the pure joy on AJ's face when they told him the news only confirmed that Andrew made the right choice.

Still, it was hard not to have second thoughts, especially now that the chopper was out of sight. This was such a major life event decided on a whim and there was no going back, which would've made any normal person rightfully nervous. AJ, however, had zero doubts about staying in Russia and was first to turn his attention away from the sky. He studied the map his mother just handed over to him, a hand-drawn sketch of the trail from the Urals facility to the site where the Russians chose to build their new home.

"I think our best bet is to head through those mountains over there," AJ said, pointing to a familiar area on the far side of the valley. "I know the *perfect* trench we can pass through."

AJ referred to the trench he'd tried escaping through with his girlfriend, Irena, a plan his parents found out about in advance and thwarted. AJ was willing to leave his parents forever to stay in Russia, a strong conviction neither of his parents shared about returning to America.

"Be careful with that map, AJ," Andrew said when he saw the

piece of paper fluttering in his son's hand. He could almost imagine a gust of wind blowing the map away, leaving them stranded without knowing where to go.

"Don't worry, I'm not stupid," AJ said. "I didn't lose the map the first time I tried leaving and I won't lose it now. If we leave now, we obviously won't catch up with the rest of the group but we should make some progress. I doubt that Ivan and his people completed the whole trip in one day but we might move quicker than them since there's only three of us."

Over the last week, evacuation of the underground bunker took place, the strongest workers going first, gradually transporting supplies and equipment to a construction site pre-selected by an advanced scouting party. The remaining inhabitants – the large majority being women, children and the wounded – left the day before, a large group led by Ivan. They hoped to make the trip in a single day but though that was unlikely, Andrew was sure Ivan would have his people moving again at this moment.

"Hopefully the hundreds of people left behind some sort of trail we'll be able to follow," Katina said.

Now that they were moments from leaving themselves, Andrew felt panicked about the distance they had to travel over unfamiliar – and possibly dangerous – terrain. He felt horribly under-prepared to attempt such a mission and wondered if now was the best time to leave.

"Maybe we should wait until tomorrow," he suggested. "We don't have much food or water with us. I'd hate to go on such a long trip without the proper supplies."

"Aren't all the supplies gone?" AJ asked. "I thought Ivan's people and everyone in the chopper cleaned out the bunker's supply room. I helped; that room was *completely* empty."

"I'm sure we could scrounge together *something* down there. It's not like the facility was totally cleaned out," Andrew said.

"Didn't you already set timers on the animal cages?" AJ asked.

"Yeah, but it's not like any of those animals are *that* dangerous," Andrew countered. "And if we head back in now, there

should still be time to shut off the timers.”

“That’s a waste. We can go a few days without food and the survey team said the river isn’t far from here,” AJ said.

“I’m sorry, honey, but I agree with AJ on this,” Katina said. “We made the choice to join Ivan and the others and I don’t think we should wait longer to start catching up.”

Andrew knew he was outnumbered so he looked at the map and chose a spot where they’d head toward first.

“Okay, reaching the end won’t be too hard if we concentrate on moving from one location on the map to the next,” Andrew said. “And *that’s* the first place we’ll go. We should at least be able to recognize if we’re going in the right direction.”

Andrew pointed to an area on the map just on the other side of the nearest hill but at least a few miles away. He still recalled the small village in the neighboring valley, where the entrance to the facility’s lift had been located. AJ didn’t seem excited to aim for a destination such a short distance away but he was glad they’d be moving forward. After all, every step he took brought him closer to getting back to Irena, a reunion he hoped to remember for the rest of his life.

Irena yawned and wished she had a few more hours to sleep; she hadn’t finally drifted off many hours into the previous night’s darkness. Sleeping on the ground made it impossible to get comfortable, not to mention the colder weather she hadn’t quite gotten used to during yesterday’s long walk. Much to her father’s chagrin, the group hadn’t been able to make the trip in one day and was forced to camp out once it became dark. But as soon as dawn broke and the day’s first rays of sunlight appeared on the horizon, Ivan woke everyone up and hurried them on their way, determined to reach camp by noon.

As she’d done the day before, Irena stayed near the back, preferring to be alone with her thoughts. She looked forward to reaching the camp as much as everyone else but she found it

impossible to act happy or excited. Her thoughts centered completely on AJ and though he ended up forgiving her for telling his parents about their plans to escape, she couldn't help but imagine what could've been had she not suffered that crisis of conscience. For all she knew, the two could've been together at that very moment, still traveling near this area or already at the camp site. Instead, she had nothing to remember him by except memories and the soccer ball she clutched against her chest.

Less than an hour after waking and walking, Irena was snapped out of her depressed thoughts by a raised level of chatter from the crowd. At first, she thought maybe they reached their destination; she rushed to the side of large group to have a better view of what lay in front of them. But Irena saw nothing except more hills and empty landscape along the nearby river, which left her wondering what everyone was getting so worked up about. Before she had the chance to ask anyone, she *heard* what the fuss was all about and immediately looked toward the sky.

The *thumping* of helicopter's blades slowly became loud enough to hear over the sound of excited chatter, which stopped to watch the chopper's approach. Irena couldn't stop from fantasizing that the chopper would spot them and land long enough for AJ to get out. That was unlikely at best but it seemed slightly more possible if only because the helicopter flew so low in the sky, barely a few hundred feet above the ground. But the chopper didn't slow at all as it approached and Irena could do nothing more than wave with the rest of the crowd, hoping AJ could pick her out among everyone else.

As suddenly as the helicopter approached, it disappeared into the distance, dashing Irena's hopes of ever seeing AJ again. For the tenth time since leaving the facility, Irena felt tears welling behind her eyes. Before the dam broke, one of her teammates broke away from his friends and joined Irena near the back of the crowd.

"Would you like company?" he asked. "I've noticed you keeping to yourself since we left."

Irena appreciated her friend's attempt to raise her spirits, but it was taking all her willpower to stop from breaking down, weakness

she didn't want to admit to anyone.

"I need to still be alone," she said, her usually strong voice cracking just slightly.

"I know you will miss, AJ, we all will. And the way he played the game will be something we remember for a long time," he said. "But I do not like to see you so sad and I will do whatever it takes to make you happy again."

Irena didn't have the energy to fight with him, especially when she saw the comforting smile on his face. In truth, she was glad to have somebody with her, glad to know somebody else might care about her as much as AJ had...

As excited as AJ was to start on the journey from the bunker to the campsite, he was equally frustrated by how slow he and his parents proceeded. Had it been up to him, AJ would have run the entire way – he was certain he had the energy to do so. But his parents preferred to take their time, to go 'slow and steady' to make sure they went the right way and avoided dangerous situations. Also, his father's ankle – which he broke on the day of the comet strike and had never properly healed – gave him problems in areas of uneven, snowy terrain. They had to stop several times after Andrew tripped on rocks hidden by snow.

"Why don't I go ahead?" AJ suggested. "I can scout out the best areas to travel, areas less likely to bother your ankle."

"Absolutely not," Katina told her son. "We stay together the *entire* time."

Andrew stopped rubbing his ankle and stood, hobbling the first few steps before getting used to the pain. It was impossible to miss his son's impatience and he felt embarrassed to be slowing them down.

"It's okay, I'll keep up," he said. "My ankle isn't used to walking on anything but smooth ground, I wasn't expecting to have this much trouble."

AJ suddenly felt bad for rushing his parents but still took the lead through the hills, following the tracks left by Ivan's group in the

light covering of snow. After many hours of walking – *though I could have crawled faster than this*, AJ thought – they finally rounded the mountain and saw the neighboring valley in the distance.

“Are you sure this is it?” Andrew asked his son.

The boy nodded as the two looked at the large empty space, which did not contain a single vestige of the former mining town that once filled the valley. As if that level of destruction wasn’t bad enough, the mountain path ahead became dangerously steep.

“What should we do?” Katina asked. “I don’t think your ankle will do well in this area.”

Andrew looked around and realized they’d have to backtrack – possibly for several miles – to find a safer path.

“We don’t have that kind of time,” AJ said.

“We do if we want your father to make it through this,” his mother shot back.

Andrew saw disappointment in his son’s expression and again felt guilty for slowing the boy down. Without speaking a word, he proceeded ahead, much to the anger of his wife.

“Stop right there, Andrew, this isn’t safe,” she said hurrying to catch up.

“AJ’s right, we don’t have time to waste,” he said. “I don’t know about you two but I’m starting to get hungry and I don’t feel like waiting days to reach the site. Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

A few steps into the difficult area, Andrew realized how big of a mistake he made. He felt wobbly on his feet and nearly slipped several times on the slick, steep path; his ankle could not support his weight. He knew it was only a matter of time before he fell and that time came in less than five minutes. Andrew slid down the side of the hill, stray rocks and boulders jabbing him painfully all over his body. He heard his wife and son calling for him but he concentrated solely on trying to maneuver his sliding body out of harm’s way. As he began to slow when near the end of the steepest section, Andrew actually felt good about falling; he’d gladly trade a few bumps and bruises to reach the bottom of this hill. But then, his damaged ankle smashed into a jagged boulder and Andrew felt such an intense pain that he knew

he'd be slowing them down much worse for the rest of their trip...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ben and his people found a bit of luck when it didn't take long to find a major road, though no signs survived for them to know which one. Still, they could make out six distinctive lanes through many cracks and large areas where weeds poked through the asphalt; a road this size meant it was a bigger one. But that was as far as their luck went. The rest of what they saw seemed as bad as dire circumstances predicted by astronomical experts. There was not another human to be seen for miles, though this wasteland wasn't a likely destination for possible survivors.

"It's like nothing around here ever existed," Heather whispered to Colin.

As excited as the group was to set out on the journey, the overall mood quickly changed once they saw the level of devastation the comet caused. Knowing the entire western coast of Mexico and America was covered in water should've given everyone an indication of the damage but it wasn't until they saw the land with their own eyes that the group clearly understood. From that point on, they walked in respectful silence, whispering quietly whenever they needed to talk.

"The tsunami," Colin said. "It carried the seacraft all the way to the Grand Canyon so it definitely swept this far inland. I'm guessing the receding waters have been dragging most of the junk away."

As they continued moving, the group came across more garbage the farther they traveled from the coast. The junk started off as a stray piece of wood here and there but soon turned into larger piles of garbage, recognizable pieces of houses ripped from the ground and tossed in the air for countless miles before smashing onto this unknown stretch of highway. The only thing this debris had in common was an outer black char. As it became apparent that nothing – and probably *nobody* – survived, some in the group wondered about the whereabouts of those people who'd been killed. With the worldwide estimated death toll in the billions, they should have come across plenty of corpses by now.

“Don’t get me wrong, I hope we don’t find a single body but it seems strange that we haven’t found any sign of death,” Colin said.

After nearly a day of walking, the level of excitement picked up when they saw something in the distance.

“What is it?” Ben asked, as he remained near the back with Colin and Heather.

“There’s a car parked in the road ahead,” Roy Hopkins said excitedly. Hopkins was probably the wealthiest man to survive aboard the seacraft. Therefore, it was surprising to see such a man become excited by the appearance of a simple car.

“I guess the world really *has* changed,” Ben said, as if reading Colin’s mind.

While the thought of a working automobile invigorated the group so that many jogged toward it, what they found sobered any hope of an easier trip back to Kansas. The car was a complete mess, its exterior blackened like every other bit of debris they found thus far. But the damage went beyond being burned. Someone in the group recognized the vehicle as an SUV, though it was flattened to the size of a convertible, as if a giant’s foot stepped on it like it was a plastic toy.

“It was either thrown in the air and landed here like the other trash or the tsunami crashed on it and the SUV became squished under the weight of thousands of tons of water,” someone in the group said. “No wonder we haven’t found any bodies yet. Anyone caught in the tidal wave would’ve been crushed to nothingness.”

More crushed cars were discovered farther along the highway and the group even came across several destroyed boats, which were carried hundreds of miles inland. Once the sun began to dip in the hazy sky, temperatures became much colder, something *nobody* was used to considering years of warmth aboard the seacraft. The light disappeared as quickly as the warmth and the dim glow of moonlight did little to help them see.

“Okay people, this is where we stop for the night,” Ben announced. Luckily, they came across a high slope in the road and had a decent view of what was in front and behind them. Even though

there'd been zero evidence of anyone, Ben felt better knowing they'd be able to spot anyone approaching from either direction.

"We're stopping *here*?" a voice in the crowd whined. Although it was too dark to see, everyone recognized Hopkins' voice. "In the middle of the road?"

"Have you seen any hotels you'd prefer, Roy?" Ben asked. "Because if you did, I'd be more than happy to check for vacancies."

Although Ben was annoyed when he made the comment, a few people in the crowd chuckled; when Hopkins spoke again, his voice hardened as he went on the defensive.

"You think it's safe to sleep in the road?" he asked. "I know we haven't seen any working cars but I'd hate to see what would happen if somebody *did* come zooming along."

"You can sleep wherever you want, on the side of the road if it makes you feel safer," Ben said.

Between the increasingly cold weather and hours of walking – especially after everyone went years without proper exercising – the mood of the group was somber, as they faced the first of many difficult nights. Colin took Heather by the hand and led her among the group, which clustered together as they moved to an area to the side of the road. The ground was harder than everyone liked but sheer fatigue proved a great equalizer and everyone quickly went from sitting to lying, using their meager belongings as pillows.

Colin felt just as uncomfortable as the next person but he at least had Heather Sanders snuggling against him, though he knew this was more to do with sharing body warmth than anything else. He rubbed her narrow shoulders when she started shivering and started to take off his sweatshirt to give her when she stopped him.

"No, you keep that on," she said through chattering teeth. "It will be easier for you to keep me warm than the other way around."

Though a lucky few fell asleep right away, the majority shifted uncomfortably on the ground, while at least a dozen different whispered conversations went on at once. Colin and Heather listened quietly as most talking involved a myriad of complaints, ranging from the cold to hunger and thirst to all the tiny pebbles on the ground that

made falling asleep impossible. It wasn't until somebody mentioned that they never should've left the craft that everyone banded together and simultaneously shushed that unseen person. From that moment, conversations came to a halt and the only noise was caused by blowing winds and bodies shifting.

At some point that night – after many long hours of discomfort – Colin finally drifted into a light sleep, though never a deep slumber. Despite wearing every layer of clothing he owned, the chill in the night even affected him; he did not complain when others in the group huddled closer to him and Heather. His tired eyes opened at the first of hint of the night sky lightening and knew he would sleep no longer. He suddenly felt claustrophobic in the midst of so many people and he could not stay on the ground for one more second. Slowly, Colin slid his arm from under Heather's head, replacing his pack for her to use as a pillow. He stood and though the morning air was still cold, he removed his outer shirt and draped it over her.

There was barely enough light to see far but he was apparently in the middle of the sea of sleeping bodies. He knew it would be tricky to maneuver around them but he set about doing so, slowly and carefully, nearly tripping several times, narrowly avoiding stepping on dozens of people. Once clear of the crowd, he slowly walked toward the road, where he saw the silhouette of another person standing there, looking in the direction from which they came. When he realized who it was, Colin wasn't surprised.

"Have you been awake all night?" Colin asked.

"I feel like someone is out there, watching us," Ben whispered, not even turning to see his friend approach.

Colin felt a chill course through him but it wasn't from the cold. With the sun just starting to peek over the horizon behind them, he couldn't see far into the west. For several minutes he looked for any sign of movement, any sign of someone out there. For the first time since leaving the seacraft, Colin was relieved to see nothingness.

"I don't see anything," he finally whispered.

"Neither do I, I haven't all night," Ben admitted. "But that doesn't mean I don't *feel* someone out there."

“Maybe you should try to rest before we head out,” Colin suggested.

Ben did not budge from his spot and continued to stare at the empty road behind them.

“It’s inevitable, you know,” he said. “Even if someone isn’t out there now, we *will* run across someone eventually. And like you said, they probably won’t be friendly.”

Colin crossed his arms and shivered; he couldn’t wait for the sun to rise for the warmth and so Ben could see that they were safe for the time being. At the same time, Colin knew his friend was right. He’d never been confident about the group’s safety merely because they had a lot of people with them.

“We’ll just try to prepare ourselves from now on,” Colin said. “Any debris we come across, we’ll see what we can take with us as weaponry. The group will have to stay close together during our walks, keep a tight formation. And you aren’t the only one who has to keep watch at night.”

Ben nodded and finally turned away from the road behind them and looked toward the rising sun.

“Hopefully we’ll run into some clue today about which road we’re on, in which direction we’re heading,” Ben said. “Obviously we’ll continue traveling east but at some point we’ll have to turn north to head toward Kansas. I’m sure it’ll get colder the farther north we go but I hope we start seeing more signs of life – or at least fewer signs of total annihilation – the farther we get from the ocean.”

A sudden flash of light – like that of sunlight hitting metal – made both young men spin around.

“You did see that, right?” Ben asked.

“Unfortunately I did,” Colin answered. They stared into the distance for several minutes, seeing farther with every passing minute the sun rose. But they still saw nobody back there, no trace of what caused that flash. “There’s so much debris back there that the sun could’ve hit any of it.”

“Or it could’ve been *someone*,” Ben said, “someone tracking us.”

As unlikely as that scenario seemed, Colin had to admit it was hard not to think about. He had the feeling like paranoia was something that they'd have to grow accustomed to.

"Even if someone *is* back there, we have a huge lead on them," Colin said. "But maybe we should start waking up everyone and get moving. We'll make sure to cover our tracks as best as possible and change course by heading north the first chance we get."

Ben nodded and both turned toward the sleeping crowd, some of whom began to stir. Ben started waking people along the edge of the group but Colin carefully maneuvered his way back to the middle to find Heather.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alone in a room in the empty hallway recently housing those selected for the *Destinee* mission, John paced back and forth in the tiny space liked a caged tiger. He didn't know who lived in this room last but all the drawers were left wide open and a few articles of clothing still drifted around. John could almost imagine the previous tenant rushing out in a panic. Whoever lived here, John wondered if that person was now with Emily on Earth.

Or is that person still alive? he thought, sending a burst of angry adrenaline through his veins. John couldn't control this energy and ended up back at the room's door. He grabbed the handle and continuously yanked at it, his face burning red, grunting with all his might. If the handle was anything but solid metal – and for that matter, the door, too – there was little doubt he would've ripped it free. But it did not budge and he was soon out of breath, his surge of energy drained. He still felt strong enough to yell at the guard stationed outside the door.

"Let me out of here!"

"Sorry, I can't do that," the Marine answered calmly.

John took a deep breath and tried to calm himself, hoping he could reason his way out of this situation. His hands still shook with rage but he managed to make himself more relaxed.

"Come on, friend, I'm done making trouble," John said. "Just let me go so I can find out if they learned anything about my fiancée."

"That's not my call to make," the Marine said.

"Then could you find whoever's call it *is* and ask them to let me free?" John asked.

"Sorry, kid, you're not going anywhere until I'm told to let you out; that might not be for a long time."

John smacked the door so hard his whole arm stung but he refused to acknowledge pain. He suddenly wished he fought harder to avoid capture, that he hadn't concerned himself with the safety of the Marines. When inside the corner piece – discussing with the restless crowd about how they could take the shuttle – the few remaining

Marines made their second assault on the group, far more aggressive in their approach. John was actually impressed with the bravery of the few Marines, who fought their way through the crowd despite becoming inundated. For that reason, John ordered the group to stop and willingly allowed himself to be captured, expecting to be taken to the station's leaders to discuss his desire to leave the station.

Unfortunately, things hadn't quite worked out that way. The Marines hadn't entertained John's offer to join their group on a mission back to Earth and instead roughly shoved him into a locked room in the abandoned hallway. He'd been there for hours without contact from anyone. The only thing that kept him the slightest bit sane was hearing the echo of a crowd in the distance; his people remained united even if they were currently missing a leader.

John put his ear against the door when he heard another commotion. Despite not wanting an all-out war to erupt, a part of him hoped the mob was finally coming to free him.

"It sounds like they're awfully mad," he said to the door.

"What else is new?" the Marine on the other side answered.

"If you let me out, I can talk to them, calm them down," John said. "Nothing bad has to happen."

"You think we believe that?" the guard asked. "Maybe you should've thought of keeping them calm the first time."

But John heard the no-nonsense tone in the Marine's voice cracking just a bit as the distant crowd became louder. Moments later, he heard the crackle of a walkie-talkie and the sound of a panicked voice. He strained to hear what was being said but the Marine apparently floated away.

John's mind was running a hundred miles a minute, pulling him in twenty directions at once. On one hand, he wanted the crowd to bust him out of this cell so they could hijack a shuttle and go back to Earth. But realistically, doing so would put him and others in extreme danger and would not increase the chances that Emily and *Destinee* survived their landing. He realized it was selfish to expect others to risk their lives for him but his concern for Emily made it impossible to focus on anything else. Though *Destinee* may have

crashed – a scenario that caused John to feel sick – he worried just as much about his fiancée if she *had* survived. Emily might be hurt on Earth; she might be alone, in desperate need of his help. Even in the best circumstances she'd be struggling to adjust to the planet's gravity without the help of braces for her legs. Very few people aboard the station knew about Emily's disability – the result of a car accident when she was young – and therefore wouldn't know the level of help she'd require.

But the thing that concerned John most was waiting. It had only been hours since Emily and *Destinee* left and he already felt his grip on sanity slipping. And since the next group of shuttles wouldn't depart for six months – six *months* of worrying and imagining the worst scenarios possible – John didn't think his mind would survive. The idea of waiting that long was so overwhelming that another burst of energy exploded within him and he pounded on the door again, this time not stopping until his knuckles were bloodied. He heard the guard come back and screamed every obscenity he could think of.

"If you're done, I need you to back away from the door," the Marine ordered.

John's first reaction was to curse the guard, refuse any order. But a tiny voice of reason in the back of his mind reminded him the Marine would only tell him to back up if he planned to open the door. He felt another wave of anger swell inside him and hoped his voice wouldn't quiver when he answered.

"Fine, I'm moving now," he said, positioning himself to attack the moment it was possible. He didn't know how outnumbered he'd be – or how willing the Marines would be to hurt him – but John didn't care either way. The way he felt right now, he could take on an entire army of soldiers and feel confident about his odds.

Maybe they'll beat me into a coma and I'll wake up in six months, he thought, considering the worst.

As the door slowly creaked open, John cocked his fist, ready to explode on the first person he saw. But a split second before he unleashed his fury, he saw the only face on the station that could calm him down.

“I told you to get back!” the Marine yelled when he saw John close to the doorway.

“There’s no need to yell, he’s right here,” Lily said angrily as the Marine guided her into the room.

The guard apparently trusted John in Lily’s presence because he immediately closed the door as soon as she was inside. John rarely saw Lily this angry – and there had been *plenty* of chances to see her angry – and he immediately realized she was sent here to talk sense into him – or at the very least, yell at him for acting so foolishly.

“I’m sorry I caused such a scene,” he said. “You have to believe me, I didn’t mean for things to happen like that. One second, I was searching for Emily, the next I had dozens of people behind me looking for answers about how to get off the station.”

John’s apology and explanation did little to calm Lily and he expected her to launch into one of her famous tongue-lashings. That was why he was so surprised to hear the simple statement she said next.

“We need to follow through with your plans and take one of the shuttles,” she said. “And *I’ll* be the one to fly it.”

For a moment, John stared at Lily in shock, hardly able to believe what she just said. But then he realized the guard *hadn’t* brought Lily here to talk sense into him – he brought Lily here to imprison her, too.

“You, too?” he asked.

“Apparently I’m as big a threat to the safety of the station as you are,” she said. “After years of putting our lives on the line, this is how we’re treated when we have an opinion different from Peter Mansfield’s? This isn’t right and I’m not going to sit back and take it any longer; it seems like plenty of people agree with me. That’s why we need to get off this station any way we can.”

John was shocked to hear Lily speak of mutiny in such a way. He knew how quick-tempered she could be but Lily never struck him as someone willing to break the rules, especially when it came to such

a big decision like hijacking a shuttle. Considering how important she'd been to the overall safety of the station, it was hard to imagine what could've been said between her and Mansfield for the station leaders to lock her up.

But most surprising was the first thought that came to his mind, the first words he spoke in response to Lily wanting to get back to Earth.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea?" he asked. "Stealing a shuttle and flying back to Earth could be dangerous."

This time, it was Lily's turn to be shocked. Her surprised expression quickly turned to one of anger.

"Let me get this straight: I hear about you causing problems and trying to take a shuttle back to Earth and I actually agree with you. I stick up for you and for my efforts get me thrown in here and now you're backtracking on getting back to Emily?" Lily asked.

"Not exactly," John said. "Actually, no, I'm not backtracking. I'm just surprised you want to take such drastic action, too."

"I'm done being bossed around by Mansfield; there's no saying that returning to Earth will be safer in six months," Lily said. "People aboard the station have been wanting to leave for months and I obviously wouldn't try to take a shuttle unless plenty of people wanted to go despite the dangers. Besides, you're right to want to find Emily and make sure she's safe. Who knows what sort of dangers there are on Earth?"

Lily anxiously floated back and forth across the room. Having Lily ready to take one of the shuttles solved the biggest dilemma he faced – that being the need for a pilot – but that didn't mean the task suddenly become an easy one.

"We still face plenty of problems stealing one of the shuttles," John said, "the least of which is that we're *both* locked up now. The guards haven't been willing to listen to reason."

"They can't keep us in here forever."

One of the guiding principles in Slava Kovalchuk's career had

been based on the notion of *always* following orders, *never* questioning authority. From his rise through the Russian Air Force to his days spent in the Russian Cosmonaut program, he never once disobeyed a direct command from a superior, regardless of how much he questioned or disagreed with orders. Therefore, when Peter Mansfield – with the silent support of President Marshall – called for the Marines to apprehend Lily, Slava did not say a single word, even though he was shocked the station leaders took such action.

Still, Slava did not hang around the control room very long; he was concerned Mansfield might turn on him next due to Slava's close relationship with Lily and John. He floated toward his pod in the Russian section of station, though he looked over his shoulder a few times along the way, half expecting to see Marines coming after him. When he rounded the corner to his hallway, he saw and heard commotion just ahead and figured the Marines already showed up looking for him, that his people were defending him. But Slava was wrong and found the problem coming from an unlikely source.

"Did you know about this? Did you know they were sending this spacecraft back to Earth?" one of the Russians demanded, an entire group of people encircling him.

Having been the leader of the Russian group for years spent aboard the station, Slava was never once spoken to in such a manner. His people were usually quiet and docile, respectful of him and the important position he held aboard the station. To see so many people up in arms was a surprising sight, one that must've been caused by fear of the president's earlier announcement. That was why Slava did not become angry with his people's insolence.

"I did not know anything about President Marshall's plan to evacuate *Destinee*," Slava answered honestly.

But he soon learned his people weren't most upset about being lied to; they were upset about not having the same opportunity to leave the station, something the Russian group wanted as much – if not more – than many of their American counterparts.

"Why haven't we been allowed to leave if the Americans are planning their own evacuation?" another Russian asked, an even

louder chorus of agreement ringing out from the crowd with this question.

“For the same reason the rest of the Americans haven’t left yet,” Slava explained. “Poor weather conditions.”

“Poor weather? Because there’s still a little snow on the ground?” a Russian asked incredulously. “I have news for the president: if we wait until there is no snow in Russia, we’ll *never* leave this station.”

A few laughs echoed from the crowd but this was no joking matter. Slava knew for weeks how badly his people wanted off the station but the fake crisis and *Destinee’s* evacuation was apparently the last straw, much as it had been for many Americans.

“We’ve come to a group decision: we want you to speak to the station’s leaders and demand they hand over one of the shuttles to us, as promised,” the man told Slava.

Slava looked from face to face and saw firm resolve from everyone. Since the Russians made up a quarter of the station’s inhabitants – a *third* now that *Destinee* left – they were promised one of the shuttles to return to their country once the station was evacuated. Ever since the first patches of green started appearing on the Earth below, many Russians started clamoring to leave, a request Slava often talked them out of to avoid starting trouble. But now that the Americans made the first move to leave, Slava knew it would be impossible to convince his people to be patient.

“I don’t think Peter Mansfield will allow us to leave at this time,” Slava told them.

“And that is why we need you to *insist* that he lets us. The Americans are about to destroy themselves and we don’t want to stick around this station until it’s too late.”

Considering the way Mansfield imprisoned those speaking about evacuation, Slava knew his options were limited for following the wishes of his people. Leadership aboard the station was clearly crumbling and Slava hated how Mansfield dealt with any situation he viewed problematic. So as much as Slava hated the thought of disobeying those in charge, the well being of his people had to take

precedence.

“I think there’s only one way to get what we want.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Can you pivot it at all?” Katina asked.

Lying on the cold ground, the last thing Andrew wanted to try was moving his ankle. But he had to know if it was broken and moving it was the only way to find that out. He pivoted his foot forward and to both sides, grimacing as electric shockwaves of pain shot up his leg, which twitched involuntarily. Katina gently pushed around the bones he’d broken once before, which only made the agony worse. Had AJ not been standing next to them, Andrew wouldn’t have hesitated to scream every obscenity he knew.

“I don’t think it’s broken,” Katina said hopefully. “At least not as bad as the first time.”

“It sure feels like it,” Andrew said.

“Can you keep walking?” AJ asked.

Andrew’s first response – the *truthful* response – was to say ‘no’ but he could already imagine his son coming up with some scheme to head off on his own, travel to the Russian campsite alone and come back with help. If AJ was a few years older – and had he *definitely* known the way – that might not have been such an awful idea. But Andrew couldn’t fathom his son wandering alone on the surface again; the thought of that made him try standing up.

“I’ll be fine,” he said.

“Don’t rush yourself, Andrew,” his wife warned.

Andrew was wobbly on his feet and unable to put much weight on the injured ankle but hobbled down the path with Katina’s help. He nearly fell several times but the ankle loosened up the farther they moved. Unfortunately, the fall wasted precious time and the sky began to darken from the sun starting to lower and a steady cloud cover forming. The last thing they needed was rain but luck hadn’t been on their side to this point.

AJ led the way toward the valley. The closer they got, the better Andrew saw that the wide open space wasn’t as empty as he originally thought. None of the mining cabins remained intact but there were certainly many remnants, plenty of wood and debris

scattered about the valley. There was even something large and golden in the middle of the valley though it was impossible to tell what it was from this far away.

“Do you guys see that?” AJ asked. He came to a stop ten feet in front and waited for his parents to hobble toward them.

“Looks sort of like a huge nugget of gold,” Andrew said, still looking into the valley. “I had no idea there was gold in these hills.”

AJ looked confused until he turned his attention toward the valley.

“Oh, I didn’t mean *that*,” AJ said. Instead, he pointed to something much closer, near the bottom of the downslope of the hills they were currently traversing. The object wasn’t exactly on the same path but just off to the side, large enough so Andrew was surprised he hadn’t noticed it sooner. “Is that what I think?”

“It sure looks like it,” Andrew said. “At least we know that we’re in the right valley.”

AJ turned and started to rush toward it but his father immediately stopped him, ordering his son to wait for them before heading toward the large cement bunker built into the side of the mountain. This gun bunker was constructed directly above the tunnel that led to the Ural facility as a means of protection, to guard the facility during days before the comet strike in case large numbers of Russians escaped to the mountains and discovered the existence of the underground safe haven. As far as Andrew knew, the bunker was never needed but it still stood to this day, surviving when nothing else in the valley had.

Straying from the well-worn path and heading toward the bunker did Andrew’s ankle no favors, but he refused to let AJ investigate if the mounted gun was still in place. He limped across the rough terrain with the help of his wife and son; within minutes, they reached the bunker. Right away, Andrew noticed the bunker’s gun wasn’t sticking out of its slot, apparently a casualty of the comet strike; it was nowhere to be spotted. But that didn’t mean he wanted AJ to go inside and stopped his son from climbing the steps to the entrance.

“You wait out here with your mother,” father told son. “I’ll go inside and take a look.”

“You can barely walk on your own let alone climb that ladder,” AJ said.

Andrew removed his arm from his wife’s shoulder and stood on his own two feet, fighting the urge to grimace when forced to put more weight on his ankle. He slowly stepped forward – trying not to hobble while doing so – and grabbed hold of the ladder.

“Your old man might not be as weak and worthless as you think,” Andrew said, winking at his boy.

His ankle nearly gave way as he climbed the first rung but Andrew proceeded up the ladder using as much upper body strength as possible. He was out of breath by the time he reached the top and hurried inside so he could stand on one foot without his family seeing him struggle. Not much light penetrated the partially enclosed bunker but Andrew saw well enough to know he’d been right about the gun. The only damage to the bunker was the slot where the gun was once placed; it looked like a giant ripped out the weapon and left a large, ragged hole. But when Andrew looked toward the back of the cement bunker, his heart dropped and he instinctively recoiled, putting full weight on his ankle and collapsing to the floor. He scooted back and rested against the wall, rubbing his ankle while unable to take his eyes off of the one thing inside the bunker that *had* survived.

Well, not exactly survived, he thought.

“Don’t come up here,” he called down to his family.

“Why? Did you find something?” AJ called back.

“Just stay down there with your mother,” Andrew ordered, his voice taking on a firmness he wasn’t accustomed to using with AJ. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

Even though AJ and Katina were both subjected to plenty of grisly sights during their time in the facility, Andrew still wanted to shield them from such things whenever possible. Leaned against the wall opposite him – as though resting the same as Andrew – was a dead body, one he knew had been there since the day of the comet strike. Andrew didn’t understand how the massive gun – which

must've weighed hundreds of pounds and was mounted in place – had been ripped free and yet this frail person remained in the same spot he'd likely been during the strike. It was the first of many comet-related oddities Andrew was sure to see.

Even eerier was that Andrew knew exactly who this corpse was. He didn't exactly recognize the person from what he saw now; the flesh mostly decomposed to bones, the clothes tattered and not much more than rags. The bunker was supposed to have been manned by Ivan, who made the deal to protect the facility's entrance – and thus sacrifice his own life – to earn his family a spot underground. Andrew tried to imagine what life in the facility would've been like without Ivan, if so many people – himself and his family included – could've survived without the help of the former presidential bodyguard. Andrew didn't think he could have led the facility nearly as well without Ivan at his side. For that, he would be eternally grateful to the man who gave his own life so Ivan could have a chance to live.

"Thanks, James," he said to the bones of James Armour, former head of NASA and one of the founding members of the Inner Circle.

After paying respects to the fallen hero, Andrew stood and made his way out of the bunker, carefully climbing down the steps to his family. He explained that the bunker was the final resting-place of Armour and they could never invade the man's tomb. With nighttime and rain looming on the horizon, it would've made the perfect shelter but Andrew insisted they check the valley for a place to spend the night. He struggled down the hill but once they reached the bottom, it couldn't have come a moment too soon.

Andrew felt the first drop of rain and knew they didn't have time to spare. The three separated and began to comb the valley for the best pieces of wood available. He and his wife did not wander too far but as usual, AJ tested the limit of his parents and soon disappeared around a particularly large pile of debris. Katina was about to call out for him but Andrew stopped her.

"It's okay, he can't get into any trouble out there," he said.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"I don't," Andrew admitted. "But he's not a little kid anymore

and we have to get used to the idea of AJ going off on his own a little more. It's a dangerous world out there and he's getting older so we'll have to trust his judgement in certain situations. This is one of them."

Katina sighed but did not complain. The two continued to gather wood in silence, as the light drizzle turned to a steadier rain. It was tough for Andrew to hold much and keep balanced on the slick ground; it took all of his concentration to stay on his two feet. That was why he looked questioningly at his wife when she suddenly stopped working and cocked her head to the side.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

At first, Andrew heard nothing more than the patter of rain splashing around them. But he soon heard his son's voice calling their names and wasn't surprised when Katina took off without waiting to help him. Andrew hobbled after her though Katina soon disappeared around the same pile of debris AJ had. When he caught up, Andrew was relieved to find his wife and son safe, both standing next to the huge golden object sticking out of the ground, the one he'd seen when halfway up the side of the mountain. Andrew knew right away the object was manmade, shaped like a large half-dome with a point sticking out at the top.

"It's an apse," Andrew said.

"Like the snake?" his son asked.

"Not an asp, an *apse*," he said. "You find them atop churches and government buildings in this country. If I had to guess, I'd say this one came from the Kremlin."

"But Moscow isn't even close to here," Katina said.

"Look around, *nothing* is close enough for the this apse to make sense being here," Andrew said. "And if experts were right about the amount of devastation, there's every reason to believe the apse was thrown this far."

Still, imagining the force needed to toss this apse – which likely weighed hundreds of pounds, if not more – hundreds of miles was nearly inconceivable. It made Andrew realize that dealing with dozens of earthquakes and cave-ins at the facility hadn't been nearly as bad as living on the surface. He tried to avoid thinking about billions of

humans who suffered the same fate as the apse; he was suddenly surprised not to have found more dead bodies strewn about.

The rain fell harder and Andrew forced himself to focus on the situation at hand. There would be plenty of time later to ponder effects of the comet strike – on this area *and* back in America. Darker clouds approached and the sun completely disappeared from the hazy sky. Andrew knew there was little time until they faced total darkness for the rest of the day and night. The Brighton family decided to use the apse as part of their shelter and quickly worked to pile wood against it, in effect creating a tent that they hoped would block out most of the rain. Thankfully, there was plenty of construction materials to work with and they completed the shelter just as the skies opened up and the deluge began. Andrew and AJ tried to construct small barricades on both sides of the shelter to block out as much water as possible but some still trickled in.

Each Brighton had a small roll to lay on and they wasted little time trying to fall asleep. There was very little room inside and the wet ground was not comfortable but this was the first of *many* tough nights they knew they'd spend outdoors; their facility beds were now a thing of the past. With the patter of rain on the slabs of wood above – along with a few drops that still managed to leak in – Andrew had nothing to do but think about his decision to stay behind in Russia, a decision that hadn't seemed to work out yet. He started to worry that he made a colossal mistake until his son broke the silence between them to say one thing.

"I just wanted to thank you guys for staying," he said, his voice barely louder than the sound of the rain. "I can't begin to explain how much this means to me. I really love you guys."

Andrew smiled and his concerns evaporated. For too long he'd put his duty as president and facility leader at the top of his list of priorities; it felt better to put his family's happiness first now. It also made it much easier for him to fall asleep...

For the final few months spent inside the facility, AJ had

trouble sleeping despite having a roof over his head – albeit one that threatened to crumble – and a soft bed to lay on. Once his parents planned to drag him back to America and separate him from Irena, AJ constantly worried about the moment that would happen, constantly tried to figure out the best way to stop that happening. In the end, Irena was right about being honest and doing as his parents said, the only reason AJ could think why his mother and father decided to stay in Russia. As long as his father could tough his way through the ankle injury, there was no reason his family shouldn't reach their destination the next day, no reason why AJ and Irena couldn't reunite after two of the worst days of his life.

Between the pouring rain, the hastily constructed shelter, the uncomfortable sleeping conditions and the idea of seeing Irena tomorrow, AJ didn't think there was any way he'd be able to sleep. But surprisingly, he nodded off quicker and slept deeper that night than he had in a long time. At some point in the night – once the rain relented to a lighter, steadier stream and it was so dark he could not see the wooden slots just feet above his head – AJ woke when he tried to roll over and knocked his backpack against the small barricade at the entrance to their 'tent.' A surge of water entered the shelter and silently cursed when some of that water crept into his sleeping space.

"What's wrong?" his father asked sleepily.

"Nothing, I just knocked something over. It's fine," AJ whispered, making sure not to wake his mother.

He groped around the dark and stacked wood back up, limiting the flow of rainwater. AJ knew that without light, he'd never make the barricade as good as it had been before. Instead of worrying about that, he rolled over with his back facing the opening and tried to ignore the cold dampness. He closed his eyes and within minutes drifted back to sleep, where he dreamed about the moment he'd see Irena again...

AJ did not give a single thought to his backpack or to where he moved it after knocking over the barricade. Without light to see, he had no idea that part of his pack was actually out in the rain, nor did he know he'd forgotten to zipper it up all the way when he'd taken

out his sleeping roll earlier...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The second day of walking was more strenuous for the seacraft group than the first. Having gone nearly a day and a half without food or water, many in the crowd grew weary, especially since they got little sleep the night before. From the moment Ben woke them at the crack of dawn, he pushed them hard, trying to cover as much ground as possible. By midday, they walked nearly a dozen miles but were dead tired for their effort.

“We need to stop and take a break,” Roy Hopkins complained. Complaining was nothing new to Hopkins but for once, plenty of other people nodded in agreement.

Ben and Colin simultaneously turned and checked the highway behind them, still spotting no trace of movement.

“If we stop every time we’re tired, we’ll never reach Kansas,” Ben finally said. “We have a long journey in front of us but believe me, it’ll take *much* longer if we don’t push ourselves. We’ll have plenty of time to rest once we reach Lehigh.”

Ben looked around the group, expecting to see agreement at the sound of their hometown, a reaction he usually received when mentioning Lehigh. But he didn’t see a single smile from anyone.

“We don’t even know if Lehigh exists anymore,” someone said. “What have we seen that gives you the impression your homes didn’t suffer the same fate as everything else?”

“Because Kansas is still hundreds of miles away,” Ben said, a thought he meant as encouragement but one that elicited several loud groans. “I know it’s far but hopefully it’s far *enough* to have avoided the devastation we’ve seen so far.”

“Wishful thinking.”

“What was land like when we first reached the shore?” Ben asked.

“Completely desolate,” Hopkins said. “Totally wiped out. Is that supposed to make us feel better?”

“Look at it now,” Ben said, sweeping a hand across the landscape. “Does this look *totally* wiped out?”

The landscape was nothing short of depressing but it *wasn't* as empty as they first saw. More debris littered the land as well as numerous trees, even *if* most of those trees were severely charred and bent at angles that didn't appear possible. Despite the severely charred cars they passed earlier, the severity of damage seemed to decrease with every mile they walked.

"It doesn't look great, that's for sure," Hopkins argued.

"My point is the coast seemed to suffer the most damage and it's been getting better as we proceed east," Ben said. "Things can only get better from here."

Hopkins snorted, clearly not buying this argument. But like the others, he had no extra energy to waste on arguing. The group walked in silence for the next hour but nothing Ben could say would keep them from stopping when finally coming across a tiny stream off the highway. The appearance of water – regardless of how sanitary it might or might not be – was enough to send half of the group running.

"Be careful with that," Ben warned. "It might not be safe to drink."

Nobody paid attention, though. Soon everyone drank from the stream. Luckily, there was a large pile of debris on the other side of the highway and Ben made his way toward the junk. Colin soon joined him and the two finally had their first chance to talk in private since earlier that morning.

"Have you seen anything?" Colin asked.

"Not yet, but I know they're still back there," Ben said. "I can *feel* them watching us."

The two dug through trash but found only a single piece of solid wood with a nail through the end, a crude weapon at best but certainly a start. As leader, Ben took the piece of wood and the two rejoined the rejuvenated group in the middle of the highway. Heather found Colin and handed him a bottle of stream water, which he drank slowly, trying to use his teeth to filter out dirt.

"What were you two doing over there?" she asked.

"Nothing, just looking for potential weapons," Colin said. "You can never be too safe out here; you never know what we might find."

Heather raised a suspicious eyebrow but Ben gave the order to move out before she could question Colin further. The group pushed hard for several more hours but it wasn't long before they drained the energy gained from their water break. They were allowed to take more and more breaks but that only happened when they found large piles of debris, which Ben and some others rifled through. Soon, nearly a dozen of the group's strongest men were armed with everything from nail-studded wood to pointy metal rods to sharp pieces of glass – anything that could be used in hand-to-hand combat. Ben strategically placed his armed people in a perimeter around the rest of the group, something that didn't go unnoticed by the crowd.

Ben continued to push them despite complaints. It was up to Colin to keep the crowd upbeat, which was hard to do considering how tired everyone was. Even Heather –probably in the best shape of everyone – started to slow, a sight that made Colin realize how tired he felt, too. But he kept looking behind them, reminding himself that they needed to keep pushing to get away from whomever might be following.

“What's going on?” Heather asked firmly. “You've been acting strange all day. What do you think is back there?”

Colin noticed a few nearby people turn toward them so he took Heather by the arm and held her back until they could talk in private.

“I didn't want to worry you but there's a chance we're being trailed,” he whispered.

Heather nervously glanced back as Colin explained the flash of light they saw earlier that morning. She tried to justify the reason for such a flash of light but it was clear Heather was just as concerned at the thought of being followed.

“We need to tell everyone,” she said.

“Ben doesn't want to get them all nervous; it's already hard enough trying to control so many people.” Colin said.

“Colin, we *can't* keep this from everyone, you know that isn't the right thing to do,” she said. “Besides, you can't arm people without letting them know the possible risks.”

Colin knew Heather was right but he still felt uncomfortable

breaking his word to Ben. Ben, however, disliked Heather enough so she didn't care if she made him mad. She assured Colin she'd handle the situation and did just that, catching up with everyone and stopping them to announce their possible tail. Ben was clearly annoyed and shot Colin the same look he usually reserved for Heather.

"We knew the trip to Lehigh wouldn't be without a few bumps," Ben said. "But that's exactly why we need to keep moving so we can get away from these people."

"We're so tired we couldn't outrun a turtle," Roy Hopkins said. "And if we keep pushing ourselves, it'll only make things worse if these people behind us catch up and we have to fight."

For once, Roy's complaining was based on intelligent thought. Colin and Ben were just as tired and both knew they'd only feel worse in days to come.

"Then we pick our spot and fight now before we're unable to do so," Ben said. "Does everyone agree?"

An expression of fear was evident on everyone's face but every head in the group eventually nodded. With that strategy decided, they continued along the highway for another hour before finding the place among a small forest of burnt trees they hoped would make a good ambush spot. They picked up a few more weapons along the way but it was clear their only chance of survival was against an inferior, poorly-armed foe.

There were nowhere near enough dead trees to hide everyone but Ben and Colin hoped they'd have enough cover to make the ambush work. The two stayed near the front of the group and each held a weapon that might or might not be able to hurt a fly let alone a band of rough comet survivors. They hoped their sheer numbers – and that they had nothing of worth to offer – would fend off their stalkers without the need for a physical confrontation. Colin's eyes were focused on the road, which was why he nearly jumped out of his skin when someone sneaked up from behind and tapped him on the shoulder. He raised his weapon and spun around, coming face to face

with Heather, who looked just as surprised as he felt.

"You're going to give me a heart attack," Colin hissed. "What are you doing up here?"

"I can't stand in the back and hide with the others who can't fight," she insisted. "I know you saw *GirlFighter*; I had to go through months of fight training for that role."

"This *isn't* a movie," Colin said.

"I think you should let her fight if she wants," Ben interceded, though he clearly didn't have Heather's best interests in mind. "Let's see if that training paid off."

Colin sighed. For once, he actually longed for the days when Ben and Heather didn't speak.

"Fine, stay behind me," he said.

Colin didn't like the idea of putting Heather in *any* sort of danger but she'd be in trouble anyway if the stalkers were strong. Besides, Colin fought his best every time Heather faced danger before so having her close would provide extra motivation. The first twenty minutes of waiting were spent in anxious silence. Everyone craned their necks to look into the distance. But once twenty minutes turned to an hour and then one hour turned to two, the general feeling became much more relaxed since the highway remained empty. The group clamored for rest all day but now that they got it, they grew restless. As usual, one voice complained louder than the others.

"Are you sure we're being followed? Maybe you were imagining things," Hopkins called from the back of the crowd.

Others rustled about but Ben silenced them. When another hour passed without movement, Colin began to have his own doubts. It was already the middle of the afternoon and they were losing daylight hours, wasting time they could've spent walking.

"Maybe they changed their minds about following us," Colin whispered. "Or maybe they sniffed out the ambush and are trying to wait us out."

"I don't think so," Ben said, eyes still not moving from the empty highway. "They were staying far back so we should wait a little longer for them."

During the next fifteen minutes, Colin tried to think of a way to convince his friend that they needed to get moving, that there wasn't anyone behind them. But just before he was about to say something, Ben held up a hand and pointed into the distance, where a pair of figures appeared. Within seconds, the rest of the seacraft group saw approaching people and those with weapons braced for a fight.

"Don't make a move until I give the order," Ben whispered to his soldiers.

It took the two followers nearly fifteen minutes to come into range, a quarter of an hour that left dozens of people on edge. But when they came close enough for Ben to recognize, the tension of the moment – slowing building for hours – suddenly exploded into pure anger and he didn't wait for the others to follow before he charged. With his weapon raised, he ignored the first man and charged at the other, though he could tell Tyler Ainsworth and Earl Ackerman were both surprised to see him.

"I told you not to follow us!" he yelled at Ainsworth, placing the point of his sharp stick against the man's throat.

"Please, don't do it," Earl said nearby, though he made no move to help Ainsworth. "We waited in the ocean for hours for the seacraft to return but it never did. We had no place else to go and this was the first road we found; we started walking it, just like you and your people. It wasn't our intention to follow you."

Tyler made a sudden move but it was by no means aggressive. In fact, he looked pathetic as he fell to his knees. The rest of the seacraft survivors came forward to witness Ainsworth in his moment of greatest humility.

"Please, I have nothing left," Tyler said, his voice cracking and on the verge of tears. "I deserve nothing from any of you but please forgive me for everything I've done."

Ben remained standing tall over Tyler, his weapon still threateningly close to the man's neck as the crowd watched in silence, waiting to see what would happen. For nearly a minute, Ben stood still in front of Ainsworth, eyes glued on the man in front of him, his hand shaking as he pondered how far to take this. Finally, Colin

stepped forward and took his friend's weapon, gently pulling it away from the broken man who humbly knelt before them.

"Can't you see how powerless he is?" Colin asked. "We should let the two of them join us, there's nothing he can do anymore to harm us."

"I agree that he's weak," Ben said. "But I don't want him with us, *nobody* wants him with us. You think I'm alone in my hatred for him, for my desire to see him suffer, but I'm not."

"Then let's put it to a vote," Colin said.

Colin expected Ben to fight this idea, expected him to assert his dominance as the group's leader. But Ben proved him wrong by speaking a single word.

"Fine."

Colin was taken aback by his friend's reaction but gave Ben no chance to change his mind. He turned and addressed the crowd.

"All day, we've been rushing away from what we thought was danger," Colin started. "And while we're still likely to run across bad people in this world, if we do not show compassion for these two men and allow them to come with us, they will die, and *we* will end up being no better than that which we fear."

"Okay, that's enough campaigning," Ben interceded. "You've made it known perfectly clear how you feel about this. By a show of hands, who thinks Tyler and his friend should have to leave us forever?"

The four men in front of the crowd looked to the masses with great interest; two of them were practically having their lives decided upon. At first, there was no movement among the crowd and Colin felt a swell of pride in his chest, hoping he'd actually gotten through to them. But as suddenly as hope emerged in him, Colin saw a single hand shoot up among the crowd, the first vote against Ainsworth that quickly led to a second and then third.

Colin wasn't nearly the most upset person to see the wave of hands raising, though. Still on his knees, Tyler could tell he'd been defeated, that bowing down to these people would not save his life. Any humility he felt was instantly gone, replaced by a hatred for every

single one of his former passengers – upper and lower level alike. Before Ben had the chance to officially render his decision, Ainsworth stood and turned his back on the people in a final act of defiance.

“I’m sorry,” Heather Sanders said, one of the final people to put her hand up. For a moment, Tyler was confused by the apology until he realized the actress wasn’t looking at him but at Colin, who stepped aside and did not say another word.

Ben raised his weapon to Tyler’s throat.

“Consider this your second warning,” he told the former seacraft owner. “You won’t get a third. You can travel this road but you better stay a day behind us at all times and you better not turn off when we do.” Ben turned and addressed the group. “I’m sorry we wasted so long on this but it’s time to move out and use as much daylight as possible.”

Leaving Earl and Tyler in their dust, Ben led the group forward, glancing behind him plenty of times to make sure the other two didn’t follow. The group might’ve squandered numerous hours waiting but less than twenty minutes after heading back out, they were met with a positive sign that made them so happy they nearly forgot about leaving Earl and Tyler behind. They finally came across a major connecting highway that was headed northbound. Without hesitating, Ben and the others decided to take this route, as doing so accomplished two goals at once: heading north toward Kansas *and* completely ditching the two unwanted men a mile back.

Meanwhile, Earl felt hopeless, even more so knowing their plans to trail the group from afar barely lasted a day. Not only were they out of options for how to proceed but the cooperative Tyler had suddenly reverted back to the vindictive and bitter Tyler, who seemed less interested in figuring out how to survive and more concerned with how to get revenge on Ben and the rest of the group...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Status update?”

“All is quiet, sir,” the Marine answered. “Ever since we put Miss Edwards into custody with Mr. Fare and you locked down this hallway, there’s been little noise. The two prisoners have no chance of getting out unless that’s what you want.”

“Very good, Marine. Make sure that doesn’t change until I give the order. Out,” Mansfield said. He clicked off the walkie-talkie and returned it to his pocket before rejoining the president, who continued to stare out of the large control room window. “I told you everything would be okay, sir.”

President Marshall slowly shook his head. Before he even spoke a word, Mansfield knew what the president was going to say.

“Maybe we should let them take one of the shuttles,” Marshall said. “Surely you understand why John and Lily are so upset, not to mention everyone else. If so many others want to leave, if there’s enough to fill an entire shuttle, who are we to keep denying them? After all, it seems pretty obvious the people are finally banding together against us.”

“Who are *we*?” Mansfield asked angrily. “*We* are in charge of this station and it’s not like we appointed ourselves to this position after the station was built. *We* practically discovered the comet, *we* worked for years to get this station built, *we* dealt with all the consequences on Earth when people thought we were crazy for building this station. Our constant efforts are why these people are still alive; that entitles us to make the tough decisions.”

The president sighed wearily.

“This shouldn’t be about having power, that’s not the reason we built this station,” President Marshall argued, though there was little fire in his voice. “Besides, we’ve made decisions on our own long enough and it’s obvious the passengers have finally reached a breaking point from our lies, that they resent us for what we’ve done. At some point, we’ll have to start running things democratically again or we’ll be outcasts on Earth.”

“Mr. President, say what you will about lies we’ve told but the tough decisions we made were based purely on what we felt was best,” Mansfield said. “Sure, some people might be angry and want to take a shuttle, but those decisions are based on their *emotions* and it’s not a smart idea to decide such things with your heart and not your brain. Besides, I guarantee everyone will calm down now that we have John and Lily isolated from them.”

“I hope you’re right,” Marshall said. “Because I don’t want to come this far just to have everything unravel by a revolt that could’ve been avoided through compromising.”

Before Mansfield had the chance to ponder that, he received another walkie-talkie transmission as if perfectly on cue.

“Sir, did you unlock the entrance to this hallway?” the Marine asked.

“Of course not,” Mansfield said. “Don’t you think I would’ve informed you if I’d done so?”

“One of my men informed me the airlock at the end of hallway has just opened.”

Mansfield rushed toward the computer systems, purposely avoiding the president’s gaze.

“That’s impossible,” he said. “We haven’t touched the computers since locking down that section.”

But when the Chief of Staff checked the station’s security system, he found the Marine telling the truth, that someone indeed gained access to that hallway. He had trouble wrapping his mind around a potential breach and felt a mixture of panic and anger boiling in his stomach.

“Only someone with keycard access could’ve gotten through,” Mansfield said. “Are all of your men accounted for?”

“There’s only a few of us, sir, and we’re at our posts. I personally have the access cards of both prisoners so they couldn’t have given them to anyone else,” the Marine answered. “Is there anyone else aboard with such access?”

“There is one other person,” the president said.

Knowing they’d finally lost control, the president continued to

shake his head as he stared down at the Earth.

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If John thought his room/cell was small when he was alone, the space felt cramped now that he shared it with Lily. At first, it was nice to have company, to have someone with whom he could vent his anger and frustration and concern. But Lily was obviously the dominant one of the two caged animals and paced back and forth relentlessly, leaving John with nothing more than a tiny corner.

It hadn't taken long before the two ran out of things to talk about and they no longer tried reasoning with the guards. John eventually longed for the hours spent alone in the room, when he could shout and curse and smash the walls without worrying about what Lily thought. He no longer had any release for the buildup of emotion as he thought about Emily; he quickly approached the point of emotional breakdown. Waiting became brutally taxing for both of them and time seemed to slow, passing minutes more like hours.

When they finally heard a different noise on the other side of the door, Lily and John rushed over to listen. In the distance, one of the Marines called something to the leader, who still guarded the pod's main entrance.

"It sounds like they said something about a door opening," John whispered. "Do you think they mean our door?"

"Shh!" Lily hissed.

"Are you sure?" the Marine called out. "I better call it in to Mansfield to see what's going on."

John and Lily listened to the Marine and Mansfield argue about the airlock door being opened again. John hadn't heard the angry mob since Lily arrived and the empty hallway was blocked from the rest of the station but apparently something was happening to disturb that, something Mansfield and the Marine both sounded angry and confused about.

"Who else has access to get into this hallway?" John asked. "Didn't they take your card, too?"

He saw Lily's face brighten as though she figured something out

but she shushed him again so they could listen. The walkie-talkie conversation momentarily ended, replaced by a noise in the distance that John hadn't heard for hours.

"Is that the crowd?" he asked. "It sounds like they're getting louder."

"Something is happening now please *shut up*," Lily said.

Not only did the crowd sound like it was getting closer but there was yelling from the Marines, general confusion about what to do.

"Stop them," Mansfield's voice yelled through the walkie. "Do whatever you have to!"

"But there's *more* of them now," the Marine yelled back. "A *lot* more."

"I don't care, do your job!" Mansfield ordered.

"Copy that. Out," the Marine said.

"What are we going to do?" one of the other Marines asked. "If we try to stop *this* group, things are going to get bad for us."

"There's no way we *can* stop them," another agreed. "I don't know if we should even *if* we could."

John and Lily waited breathlessly as the crowd grew louder and louder. It wasn't long before they no longer heard the four Marines though they were still gathered on the other side of the door. Just when it sounded like the crowd could become no louder, it suddenly came to a complete stop – total silence. John didn't even have the chance to ask anything before Lily clamped her hand over his mouth.

"We do not wish to have a problem with you," a familiar voice said. "Now please open that door and go away and there will not be trouble for you and your men."

The impending silence seemed to last forever but John and Lily finally heard the *clicking* of their cell door being unlocked. They instinctively backed away from the door.

"Come on, guys, let's get out of here," the Marine-in-charge said.

When the door opened, Lily and John saw a familiar face smiling at them.

“I am sorry it takes me so long to get here,” Slava Kovalchuk said. “Now I think it is time to get off of this station.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The few remaining Marines were more than capable of defending themselves in a physical confrontation but none had delusions of grandeur in regards to their fighting ability. Therefore, they were more than content to follow Slava Kovalchuk's order to leave the prisoners' cell. The crowd was larger than the first one, as every single Russian aboard the station was present and appeared ready for a fight, which the Marines wanted no part of.

"Status update?" Mansfield's voice yelled through the walkie-talkie. The Marine-in-charge grabbed the walkie from his pocket but hesitated to answer, knowing Mansfield would be livid that they abandoned their post.

"Is that Peter Mansfield?' somebody in the crowd asked.

The Marine looked at several angry faces in the crowd, all of which scowled at him. It came as little surprise that people appeared angry at the mention of Mansfield.

"Make sure you squash that mob by whatever means –"

The Marine quickly killed power to the handheld device before Mansfield caused the mob to start rioting. The Marine and his three men were halfway through the throng of Russian and American mutineers and it wasn't easy trying to move in one direction while everyone else was headed the other way. It seemed to take forever but the crowd finally thinned once they passed through the corner piece and the Marines finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"I wouldn't feel too comfortable," the Marine-in-charge said. "We still might be in much trouble once Mansfield and the president find out what happened."

"Who cares about them?" one of the Marines asked. "I say we let them handle the protestors by themselves. The only reason people are so mad is because Marshall and Mansfield lied too many times. It's about time they pay for that."

"That's *enough* of that talk, Marine," the leader chided. "We follow orders given to us – at least when those orders are feasible – and it's our duty to protect those in charge, regardless of how we feel

about them.”

“Forget that,” the angry Marine said. “I’m pretty sure I know who’s *really* in charge of the station now, whether they’re inside the control room or not.”

In a move that shocked and angered the highest-ranking Marine left, two of his men turned their backs to him and headed off to join the mob. The remaining Marines made their way through the hallways, mostly empty since everyone seemed to be part of the crowd.

“Maybe we *aren’t* choosing the right side,” the other Marine said upon seeing no other passengers in the halls. “If everyone else thinks one way, maybe they’re right.”

But one of the passengers suddenly stuck her head out of her pod when she saw security racing by.

“What’s going on?” the frightened woman asked as she looked down both ends of the hallway. “Did you finally get everyone to calm down?”

“Unfortunately not, ma’am,” the Marine leader said.

“I don’t think they’re going to cooperate until they get what they want,” the other Marine said, receiving an annoyed look from his leader for this blunt honesty.

“To leave the station and head back to Earth?” she asked incredulously. “Are they crazy? I understand the day will come when we *have to* abandon the station but why rush? We’re safe here for now, there’s no reason to risk that.”

“Safe is how we want to keep things,” the Marine leader said. “I’m sure this situation will be resolved shortly but I suggest you return to your room and remain there until we take care of this.”

The woman did as she was told and the Marines continued on their way, concluding that half the remaining Americans aboard felt the same, though they were less likely to voice that opinion in the face of such an angry mob. Within minutes, they reached the control room and knocked.

“Go away!” Mansfield yelled from inside.

The man undoubtedly assumed the mob arrived but that just

proved how little he knew about the overall problem: had the mob actually been here, Mansfield would've *heard* them long in advance. The Marine leader used his keycard to gain access to the control room, which he rarely had reason to enter. Mansfield and Marshall looked on with fear from the far side of the room until they recognized the Marines, who quickly entered and shut the door behind them. Now that he was safe, Mansfield's expression suddenly turned to anger.

"Why have you been ignoring my calls?" he barked at the Marine.

"Because your mouth almost got us killed," the other Marine said angrily.

"Did you take care of the problem?" Mansfield asked.

"The *problem* is much larger than it was before," the Marine leader explained. "Slava Kovalchuk and the rest of the Russians have joined the mob. It appears that *two* of the three remaining shuttles are in serious jeopardy of being taken. If I were you, I'd consider locking them down before the mob reaches them."

"Oh, *that's* what you suggest?" Mansfield asked sarcastically. "Well *I* suggest you do your job and take control of the situation."

"It's impossible to stop hundreds of angry people when there's only two of us," the Marine leader snapped.

"Two?" President Marshall asked, his voice hardly above a whisper. "I thought there were four Marines left."

"There *were* four of us until two decided they knew which side was going to win this," the Marine said.

"I can't believe Slava betrayed us," Mansfield said to nobody in particular. "We never should've trusted him."

"Slava is a good man," the president said. "Just like John Fare is a good kid, just like Lily Edwards is a good woman. There are *no* bad people aboard this station, just a lot of folks who've been pushed too far." Marshall sighed before turning toward the Marine. "Soldier, is there any way to defend those shuttles against the mob of passengers?"

The president looked into the eyes of a frightened young man and almost felt bad for asking him such a tough question. The Marine

obviously wanted to handle such a difficult crisis but the most qualified Marines had been killed years ago.

“We will fight if that’s what you want and I promise we can take some of them down,” the Marine said. “But in the end, there’s no way the four of us can stop them if this situation turns physical.”

“You’re including me and the president as part of your fighting crew?” Mansfield asked. “Are you serious?”

“That’s enough, Peter,” Marshall said. “There isn’t going to be a fighting crew because there’s no point injuring people when it’ll do no good.”

“Then what would you like us to do, Mr. President?” the Marine asked.

Marshall turned back toward his window and pondered that question, though he already knew nothing could be done. Before he had the chance to answer, the four men heard the distant sound of the approaching crowd, which only took moments to reach the control room. When the door opened this time, there were no friends coming to protect the station leaders. John, Lily and Slava made their triumphant return and left the door wide open; the rest of the crowd gathered in the tight space just outside.

“Traitors, all three of you,” Mansfield hissed at them, somewhat trying to keep his composure. “We trusted you with full access to this station, trusted you to keep us safe and maintain order. And this is how you repay us?”

John and Lily looked at each other as if trying to figure out who’d argue first. Surprisingly, Slava stepped forward to address Mansfield.

“This is not about being a traitor, this is about wanting to make our own decision to leave,” Slava said. “We do *not* want to be told what to do anymore.”

“That decision has already been made, it’s the reason we’ve done the things we’ve done,” Mansfield said. “The other shuttles will not leave this station for the next six months.”

“That’s unacceptable,” John said.

“I don’t care what any of you say, that is the plan and we’re

sticking to it.”

Slava sighed and realized this wouldn't be as easy as he hoped, realized Mansfield would not listen to reason and give in without a fight.

“We have enough people to do as we please,” the Russian said. “We do not want it to come to such a battle but we will if we must.”

“Is that a threat? Are you threatening me and the president?” Mansfield asked, growing louder and angrier. “My men are trained for combat.”

On cue, the two remaining Marines reluctantly took position between the three intruders and the two station leaders.

“Two of them against all of us?” Lily asked. “Don't do something stupid, *Peter*, and make us use numbers to our advantage. This won't end up well for you.”

“We aren't afraid,” Mansfield said though the crack in his voice said otherwise. “The only way you'll get to those shuttles is if you take them from us.”

He spoke loud enough so those outside the control room heard his threat, an unwise move since the crowd began to shout angrily and push forward into the small room. The Marines braced for a fight – exactly what the crowd expected to give – but President Marshall finally intervened.

“Stop!” the president yelled, his voice loud enough to carry over the sound of dozens of angry passengers. “Everyone just stop!”

The crowd instantly quieted and the surge came to a halt, as all eyes fell on the embattled president.

“You can have your shuttles as long as this evacuation is done in an intelligent manner,” Marshall said. “As long as no space is wasted aboard either craft and there's enough room aboard the last shuttle for every remaining passenger who wants to wait with us.”

“Mr. President, we shouldn't give in to – ”

“*I'm* in charge, Peter,” the president snapped, immediately quieting his right hand man and making him turn crimson. “I have the final say in such matters and if these people want to risk their lives by leaving now, that is their right, as long as they don't put the rest of us

in jeopardy. Now please, call off your mob and let's discuss this in a civilized manner."

Slava and John smiled but Lily was far less trusting of the president.

"How do we know you won't lock us up again if we send everyone away?" she asked.

"Because *I* don't particularly have a death wish," President Marshall said. "I know your people would rip us apart if we tried doing that. Believe me, Lily, I have no desire to continue this fighting."

Lily wasn't totally convinced but the three resistance leaders momentarily left the control room and exclaimed victory to their people. They told everyone to return to their room and start packing; the large mob dissipated within minutes. Slava, Lily and John rejoined the president and Mansfield and worked out the details of what needed to be done next, starting with a station-wide announcement to find out which passengers wanted to leave aboard the soon-to-be-departing shuttles.

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After President Marshall's announcement about two shuttles leaving, the station was abuzz with a mixture of excitement and nervousness as the effort was underway to determine who'd depart. There was still much work to be done to make this a reality but now that John knew his pipe dream would soon come true, he had trouble focusing on anything else but the thought of Emily, the thought of returning to Earth to find her. So many thoughts and worries ran through his mind and though he could've moved along the process of evacuation quicker, he was too impatient to focus.

John tried to pass time in the room he'd shared with Emily for so many years. The two made so many lifelong memories here that John avoided coming here after *Destinee*. He could only now return because he'd soon leave the station forever. He packed a small bag with his few meager belongings but focused mostly on as much of Emily's stuff as possible; she obviously had no time to pack anything.

When he could no longer squeeze another item in the bag, John took his painting – Hokusai’s “Great Wave Off Kanigawa” – and tucked it beneath his arm, determined to bring it with him. After all, Emily sacrificed so much to obtain the artwork from the Russians and it was the most precious belonging he ever owned. Once done, John took a final glance around the room before closing the door for the final time, praying he’d have the chance to share another room with Emily on Earth.

If we ever get a chance to share a room again, he thought, trying to keep any bad thoughts out of his mind. John still couldn’t stop imagining horrid images, images of fiery wreckage and exploding spacecraft. Had *Destinee* and Emily not survived the landing on Earth, he hoped his shuttle wouldn’t survive either. John knew that was a selfish thought but did not want to picture what life would be like if he survived and Emily hadn’t.

“Ready to go so soon?” Lily asked when John floated into the hallway. “There’s a lot of work to be done first. I’ve only made it through half of the station so far.”

After striking the deal with President Marshall for the two shuttles, the president announced his decision to the entire station and informed everyone that Lily would come around to take names of those interested in leaving right away.

“How are the numbers looking?” John asked nervously.

“Good, there’s nothing to worry about with that,” Lily said. “I’d say about half the passengers are on board with leaving. As long as this ratio keeps up – and I don’t see why it wouldn’t – we should be good to go. I just saw Slava and he’s already got the approval from *all* of his people – no big surprise there. It shouldn’t be long before the Russians leave.”

“They’re going *first*?” John asked. “After *we* came up with the idea to take the shuttles? After *we* were imprisoned?”

“They don’t have as much work to do as us,” Lily explained. “And since they’re going back to Russia anyway, the president doesn’t care as much if they rush their evacuation.”

“We’re still worried about pleasing Marshall?”

“I know you’re in a rush to get out of here and get to Emily but this isn’t something we should rush,” Lily said. “Too many people will be affected so we have to do it right. Don’t worry, we’ll leave soon enough and the two of you will be reunited as long as you have patience now.”

Lily wanted to explain that the process would go much quicker if John helped her tally numbers but he was obviously in no frame of mind to accomplish anything productive. She worried about him as he took off down the hallway but there were still a lot of people to talk to and the best way Lily could help him was to speed along this process. She entered the nearest pod and knocked on the first door, quickly answered by a scholarly-looking gentleman.

“Professor, do you plan on staying aboard or leaving on the first shuttle?” she asked.

“I’ve already got my books packed and ready to go,” Dr. Chris Fratantoro replied, pointing to a bulging backpack nearby. Lily was surprised the former Ivy League professor was so interested in partaking in such an adventure; he seemed far more the conservative type. “And not to place any added pressure on you, but those books might be the last vestiges of our planet’s history so you’d better land us safely.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Andrew Brighton's eyes snapped open as the first ray of sunlight shined through the opening on the side of their makeshift tent. He couldn't believe it was morning already, even more surprised that he slept through the night, waking up only once when he heard AJ shuffling around. Andrew expected his first night on the surface to be dreadful – especially considering the substandard shelter and the miserable weather – but it actually wasn't too bad and he hoped the rest of his nights went so smoothly. He glanced over and saw Katina and AJ both still asleep and though getting an early start was important, he figured he'd give them extra time to rest.

Careful to keep weight off his ankle, Andrew crawled out of the tent and slowly stood, nearly losing his footing on the slippery ground. He tested the ankle by putting a pressure on it and could immediately tell it would be a *long* day of walking. The pain wasn't quite so bad as the day before but the ankle was weak and sore, just like the rest of his body. Having not eaten or had any water in almost twenty-four hours, Andrew felt serious weakness from hunger and thirst and resorted to finding a large puddle of water nearby. Though he knew it wasn't sanitary, he cupped his hands and scooped some out, slowly drinking while keeping an eye out for floaters.

In only five years, I've gone from being the leader of the world's biggest superpower to drinking water off the ground in the middle of nowhere, he thought with an ironic grin.

Feeling slightly rejuvenated, he hobbled toward a nearby pile of debris and searched among damaged wood until he found a stick about five feet long. He shoved one end under his arm and used it as a crutch, much as he'd done years earlier with a similarly-sized piece of metal part of the facility's track lighting. Luckily, Ivan's group took all the medical supplies from the bunker's storage room – including the *real* crutches – so Andrew only had to reach the Russian campsite before he could find relief. Until then, this piece of wood would have to make do so he hobbled around the valley to practice using it. The valley was dark when they got here the evening before but now that

he saw better – especially without a cloud in the sky – he truly saw the level of devastation, how the former mining village was reduced to smithereens. Based upon scattered wreckage across open land, his family was probably lucky to find enough wood the night before to construct their shelter.

In the distance, Andrew spotted the gun bunker on the side of the mountain and wondered if his family might've slept even better had they stayed there. Andrew's clothes were still damp from rain that dripped in but sleeping with a little water was better than sleeping in a tomb. Still, he headed in that direction when he saw the large opening to the tunnel that led into the mountain. Andrew knew the elevator shaft leading to the facility collapsed during the earthquakes but he was interested to see if the tunnel itself survived. He highly doubted *anything* around here remained intact and was therefore surprised when he reached the opening and found the entrance mostly clear. Andrew hobbled his way inside but didn't make it far before seeing nothing but total darkness ahead. He could've kept moving forward but there wasn't a point in doing so, especially when he imagined stumbling into the open shaft, his body smashing against rocks below.

When Andrew hobbled back into the valley, he heard Katina yelling his name and rushed back toward the golden apse, where he found his wife and son nervously waiting. They both relaxed when they saw him but now wore different expressions.

"Where did you go, Dad?" AJ asked excitedly, looking beyond his father to see where he could investigate.

"I woke up last night and found a hotel over there," father teased son. "I was going to wake you but you looked too comfortable sleeping in the mud."

"Yeah, right."

"Seriously, Andrew, that's not funny," Katina said, clearly the angry one of the two. "If we don't want AJ wandering off on his own, then that goes for you, too."

Andrew nodded without argument, as any good husband would to avoid further angering his wife. Thankfully, Katina didn't dwell on

the subject and the three Brightons watched the sun rise higher over the mountains. It was still early but the weather was already warming up and their clothes were nearly dry. Andrew had the feeling today was going to be a much better day. Sensing his father's optimism, AJ suggested their next move.

"We should head out early," the young man said, "especially since you already found a walking stick. Are you going to be able to move okay?"

"I'll keep up, don't you worry," Andrew said. "Now get the sleeping rolls ready so we can get out of here and reach the campsite."

AJ certainly didn't need to be told twice and rushed into the tent to gather their belongings.

"Are you sure the ankle's okay?" Katina asked. "You don't need to be ashamed if it hurts. If you push yourself too hard, you could end up causing more damage to it."

"Reaching the campsite is more important than my ankle," Andrew said. "I'll have plenty of time to rest once we're there and you and AJ are safe. Don't worry, everything is going to work out fine."

Katina didn't seem so optimistic and frowned as she gazed around the destroyed valley. As if her grimaces could predict the future, AJ suddenly emerged from the wooden tent and looked like he'd just seen a dead person.

"What's wrong?" AJ asked.

Without speaking – the expression on his face did not require words – AJ held up his backpack, showing his parents that the zipper was down. He turned the pack to the side and water poured out. At first, Andrew didn't understand why his son was so distraught – after all, they'd all gotten wet the night before and a little wetness would dry out over time. But Katina seemed to know what was going on and rushed toward their son. She stuck her hand inside the backpack and pulled out a wet mess of pulp.

"The map," Andrew said.

"I don't know what happened," AJ said. "I must've forgotten to zip up the bag after I took out my sleeping roll but I don't know how it ended up outside the tent. I'm so sorry."

The three stood in nervous silence for several minutes, pondering their next move now that the map was destroyed.

“Tons of these maps got drawn up when Dmitri returned from the campsite, maybe there are some more laying around inside the facility,” Andrew said.

Dmitri was one of the construction workers who returned to the facility specifically to help lead Ivan and the rest of the group to the campsite. His hand-drawn maps were ultimately responsible for providing the course with which all would travel.

“You think we should go back?” Katina asked. “We’d lose two days of traveling just getting there and back here. And there’s no guarantee we’d find anything.”

“I’ll go, I was the one who destroyed the map and messed this up for us,” AJ said. “Plus I can move much quicker on my own.”

“Absolutely not,” Katina said.

Andrew looked out across the valley and spotted the pass in the mountains that he first noticed the day before, the area where the map told them to follow.

“I remember a lot of the map,” AJ said, as if reading his father’s mind. “I studied it long enough.”

“Me, too,” Andrew agreed. “And if I recall correctly, we cross that mountain pass over there and head west until we reach the river. According to Dmitri, the river was the most important thing to follow. He specifically pointed out the best area to cross the river but I’m sure we’ll figure that out along the way.”

“I don’t know about this,” Katina said worriedly.

“We don’t have any other choice,” Andrew said.

Katina sighed but eventually nodded in approval.

“In that case, we better hurry and find that river,” AJ said.

With their few belongings packed, the Brightons set off across the valley and headed toward the path between the mountains. Andrew’s ankle hurt with every step but he was able to ignore the pain, too worried about whether they’d find the river once they crossed over this hill.

Hours later, neither Andrew, Katina nor AJ spoke about the possibility that they were lost, yet each silently thought about it. The previous night's rainfall washed away any sign of the tracks Ivan's group made, leaving the Brightons without a single clue about where to go. They set a fast pace in the hopes of finding the river as soon as possible, a pace that quickly became frantic once they crossed the mountain and did not find a single drop of water. Just as disappointing was the amount of energy they burned by walking so fast, which made their lack of food and water more apparent. Still, none of them considered stopping to rest since daylight hours were quickly melting away and they still weren't sure if they were traveling in the right direction.

"There used to be small villages scattered throughout these hills," Andrew said, remembering his jeep ride through the Urals prior to the comet strike. "Now nothing, not even a trace of previous human existence."

The debris strewn about the mining village ended the exception to normal conditions, as they found nearly nothing but rocky land for hours. That was why it was so strange when they came upon a tiny house completely intact, yet nearly unnoticeable due to being overgrown by weeds and other vegetation. The fact that the house appeared untouched led them to believe Ivan and his people hadn't come this way. Unfortunately, a quick search of the house revealed nothing of consequence; only two small rooms were inside and had apparently been inhabited by a simple mountain farmer.

"Even if *all* houses around here were still intact, I doubt we would've found much," Andrew said.

Soon after continuing, AJ spotted something on the ground that excited them.

"Look, tracks," he said, pointing to the rain-softened ground, which was visibly dotted with indentations. But despite plenty of tracks, the three Brightons quickly realized these tracks weren't shaped like footprints.

"Animals made these," Andrew said. He suddenly looked around, nearly falling over from spinning so quickly. "And the tracks

look fresh.”

Luckily, they still saw no sign of life – animal or otherwise – in the surrounding area but were unable to tell which direction the tracks were headed in.

“Are they headed the same way we’re going or did they come from that way?” Katina asked nervously.

Andrew studied the marks in the ground but his hunting and tracking skills were non-existent.

“I don’t think it’s possible to tell,” Andrew said.

“What should we do?” she asked. “It looks like there’s a lot of tracks. I don’t know if we should risk running into a pack of wild animals – a possibly *hungry* pack of wild animals.”

Andrew agreed that without possessing any sort of weapon, the last thing they wanted was to find such animals. The only positive they took from the tracks was that enough animals survived extinction to hopefully provide a food source for those at the campsite.

“Do you two hear that?” AJ asked.

Katina and Andrew nervously glanced around. But their son did not appear concerned – in fact, he smiled widely and started following the tracks without waiting for his parents.

“Where are you going?” Katina called after her fleeing son. “Get back here, AJ!”

But he was already running ahead and his parents couldn’t hear when he yelled back to them.

“Go find out what he’s doing,” Andrew said, taking his wife’s bag and slinging it over his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right behind.”

Katina didn’t want to leave her husband but the sight of AJ getting farther ahead made the decision for her. Andrew hobbled as quickly as he could but it wasn’t long before he no longer saw his wife and son just over a hill ahead. Carrying two different backpacks threw off his balance and he tripped several times when his walking stick became stuck in soft patches of ground. His heart pounded quicker as he finally climbed the hill; he nearly ran into the back of Katina and AJ, who stood still on the other side. Both were quiet so Andrew

decided to do the yelling for once – at least he did so once he caught his breath.

“What the hell are you thinking running off like that?” he asked his son. But AJ didn’t answer him, nor did the young man turn to look at his father. Instead, he pointed forward.

The river was so big and wide that Andrew couldn’t believe he missed it. Once his breathing slowed and he heard more than just the sound of his beating heart, the *whoosh* of raging waters became more obvious. Any anger he felt was instantly replaced with elation; the sight of this river was proof that they’d been on the right path all along.

“I *knew* we were going the right way,” Andrew said happily, though it was much easier to be confident now that there was no doubting his sense of direction. “No doubt in my mind.”

His son and wife looked at him with raised eyebrows and the three shared a laugh, finally able to relax and release stress. Still, there was no sight of Ivan’s group or the Russian campsite in the distance so they still had plenty of work to do. They walked down the hill and approached the river, which appeared larger the closer they got. Unfortunately, the current moved at a breakneck speed, which raised another red flag.

“I think we picked up the river farther downstream than we were supposed to,” Andrew said. “According to Dmitri, we should’ve crossed over when we first found it. He warned the currents became rougher farther along.”

It seemed obvious this was the ‘rough’ area Dmitri referred to and the family now faced another tough choice.

“Do we head upstream or down?” Katina wondered aloud.

“Down,” AJ answered right away. “We can’t afford to backtrack now or we’ll have *no* chance of reaching the campsite before nightfall.”

“But who knows if the river will slow down if we go that way?” Katina asked. “Now that we aren’t lost, we can afford to spend extra time backtracking, even if it means we take another day to reach the site.”

AJ couldn't hide his disappointment about the idea of spending one more *hour* away from Irena let alone another day.

"Then why not take the chance it *will* slow down?" AJ said. "Let's head downstream a few miles and see if the currents relax. If they stay as strong, we'll come back and find the safer area to cross upstream."

AJ looked at his father, knowing that he was a much easier mark than his mother.

"It can't hurt to try," Andrew said. "After all, luck *has* been on our side so far today."

"It *has*?" Katina asked. "What about the map being ruined? That didn't seem so lucky."

Andrew waved off his wife's pessimism and they proceeded downstream, keeping constant watch on the river for the first sign of the rapids slowing. But over the next few hours, AJ's plan never panned out and the river's intensity only seemed to increase. On multiple occasions, Katina suggested they turn around and head back but was overruled by her two boys, who wanted to go 'just a little farther.' AJ felt certain that things would eventually go his way – that fate would help him return to Irena – but when they saw a fork in the river ahead, it felt like fate slugged him in the stomach. They walked all the way to the end where the river split, the smaller river veering way left with as much speed as the main river.

"Looks like we painted ourselves into a corner," Andrew said.

"Maybe we should take our chances and try to cross here," AJ said.

Katina shook her head and picked up a nearby stick for good measure, tossing it into the raging waters. The stick was immediately ripped beneath the surface and swept away.

"Sorry, buddy, I tried," Andrew said. "There's no way an Olympic swimmer could survive these rapids. Don't worry, you'll get to Irena soon enough."

AJ sighed. Despite his heart telling him otherwise, his brain knew his parents were right: nobody in their right mind would try entering the water here. He was the first to turn back upstream but

didn't take a single step before freezing in place, his heart sinking as quick as the stick in the raging currents.

The Brightons were so focused on the diverging rivers that they hadn't realized a dozen hungry-looking wolves sneak up behind them. The snarling animals had the humans cornered; there was no place to escape. Before any of the Brightons could gasp at the sight of the wolves, they noticed something else that surprised them even more. Although the person standing among the wolves looked hairy and scruffy enough to be an animal, there was no mistaking the young man's identity.

Andrew and AJ simultaneously uttered the same single word.

“Andrei.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

After walking two days seeing nothing but flattened, pummeled land, the group of seacraft survivors thought it eerie – almost shockingly so – to see a city rise out of the ground in the distance. This was the first sign of human existence they'd seen and the weary, hungry crowd suddenly had something to be excited about. From far away, the city appeared mostly intact and many began to talk about the possibility of survivors having flocked to this area to reconstruct the city as a start to a new civilization.

"Maybe the aircraft we saw was headed toward here," Heather said hopefully.

"Doubtful," Ben said, overhearing the actress's conversation with Colin. "I don't think we should get too excited until we get closer and see what kind of condition this place is *really* in."

Ben's warning ended up ringing true, as the group saw more and more damage the closer they got. While they only spotted standing buildings from a distance, the debris and toppled buildings were easier to spot once they were a few miles outside of town. There was rubble as far as the eye could see and any excitement the group felt about reconstruction dissipated as it became obvious *nothing* had been fixed.

About a mile outside the city limits, somebody in the group rushed to the side of the highway and wiped off a thick covering of soot from a nearby road sign, which read: WELCOME TO PHOENIX.

"I owned my first professional baseball team in Phoenix so I spent a lot of time here," Roy Hopkins said. "I don't even recognize the place. But there might be some supplies we can use in those buildings, at least some beds to sleep in for a few days."

A number of people in the crowd – mostly the seacraft's former upper level guests – agreed with Hopkins and argued they needed rest after long days of strenuous walking. But another part of the crowd – the true Lehigh residents – argued against this idea, not wanting to become sidetracked in their long journey home. A full-fledged fight nearly broke out among the seacraft survivors and Colin and Ben had

to calm everyone down.

“Let’s wait until we get closer to see what kind of condition the city’s outer limits are in,” Ben said.

“Of course you’d say that,” Hopkins yelled. “You want to get back to your hometown as much as the rest of your people.”

“I want to do what’s best for the group; I can’t do that until I know more about the damage to the city,” Ben said.

The survivors split into two different camps as they continued along the highway, though both groups marveled at the level of devastation across the cityscape of Phoenix. The fact that several buildings survived intact was incredible considering the pounding this land must have taken, considering the way most of the city crumbled. Many streets appeared impenetrable but the group passed several off-ramps leading into the city that were clear enough to take.

“What about this one? It looks sturdy enough to use,” Hopkins said.

“And where are you going to go from there?” Ben asked, pointing out the annihilated part of the city beyond the ramp. “It looks a little clearer up ahead, let’s check there first.”

“Fine, but we’ll come back here if we have to,” Hopkins said.

Hopkins’ group stormed ahead and Ben realized the former billionaire could easily take his people and split off from the rest of the survivors. Having bigger numbers of people was crucial for group safety, which meant Ben couldn’t bark commands as he usually did. Another ramp leading into the city loomed ahead but there was a roadside gas station/convenience store before the exit.

“We’ll check in there first to see if any food or supplies survived,” Ben said, seeking a compromise with both groups of survivors. “If there’s a lot of stuff in the store, it wouldn’t be a waste of time to check buildings closest to the highway. But if nothing’s left inside the store, it wouldn’t be a good use of time to enter the city. Do you agree with that, Roy?”

“Let’s take a look inside first before we start making final decisions,” Hopkins said.

The gas station was utterly destroyed and looked like it

exploded at some point; the exterior of the convenience store was scorched black. Luckily, the store was far enough from the pumps – at least where the pumps used to be – that the building hadn't suffered more than a few blown-out windows. The seacraft survivors rested outside while a smaller search group – Ben, Hopkins, Colin and Heather – entered the store through the broken front door, which *squealed* as they pulled it nearly off its hinges. Inside was dark, especially since they'd been in the sunlight for so long. It took the four nearly a minute to adjust to the dimness before they had a better view of the store's interior.

"You still think anything survived in the city?" Ben asked Hopkins.

The store was in complete shambles, all of the bins and racks strewn about. Most overhead lighting dangled precariously from the ceiling, at least parts that hadn't already crashed to the floor or smashed through the glass doors of the refrigerated section. While this damage was expected, the four were shocked by the amount of sand covering the floor and everything else inside the building.

"I guarantee those buildings won't have this much sand in them," Hopkins said. "Besides, what did you expect? For the shelves to be perfectly stocked, waiting for your convenience?"

Though the store wasn't big, there was enough damage and chaos so that plenty of searching was required. The four split up, each taking a different section, Colin and Heather taking one side and Roy and Ben the other.

"Be careful what you dig through," Colin warned as Heather climbed over debris and headed toward the back of the store. "There's probably broken glass and shards of metal buried beneath the sand."

"Don't worry, I'm not as helpless as you sometimes want me to be," Heather said, winking.

Colin started to dig through the closest pile of junk, searching among toppled shelves and other debris for any sign of food, whether it be potato chips or beef jerky or processed sponge cakes filled with cream. But after several minutes, he didn't find a single thing, as if the place was already cleared out. It seemed strange not to find *anything* –

not even a food wrapper – so Colin got on his hands and knees and started to dig, hoping all the food was covered within the several feet of sand. But he still found nothing and moved on to another area of store, finally spotting *something*.

Unfortunately, it wasn't food.

"Heather, did you step in this far corner?" he asked.

Colin didn't look up when Heather answered from the back of the store.

"I didn't go *anywhere* that you didn't see," she said. "Why?"

On the ground was a footprint clearly bigger than Heather could've made, a footprint clearly made recently since it was yet to blow over. The sight of it meant other humans survived and were probably close by, which should've been cause for celebration but actually made Colin's stomach sink with dread. He barely felt the sickened feeling when he heard a high-pitched, blood curdling scream from the other side of the store. Colin instantly sprinted toward Heather, jumping over debris along the way, nearly falling. When he reached her, she looked concerned but nowhere near frightened enough to warrant such a cry of terror.

"What happened?" Colin asked.

Heather was turned toward the other side of the store, where they both saw Ben rushing toward the back.

"I don't know, that wasn't *me* screaming," she said.

Colin took her hand and led her through the mass of debris, finally reaching the back corner where Ben consoled Hopkins, who was clearly distraught. One glance at the floor told him why and Colin heard Heather gasp at the horrid sight. At first glance, it appeared a metal pole was sticking out of a particularly large mound of sand. Upon closer inspection, Colin realized the mound was the same size as a body, all the more evident by a cleared spot near the head, where a waxy, dead face stared straight up. The pole plunged into sand was actually stuck in the corpse's chest.

"I didn't know a person was buried underneath until I saw the eyes," Hopkins stammered. "I doubt a metal pole can get rammed into someone's chest like that by accident. This guy was *definitely*

murdered.”

“I don’t know who did it but I found footprints in the sand over there that none of *us* made,” Colin said. “Did any of you notice other tracks?”

“I was looking for *food*, not tracks,” Hopkins snapped.

The four spun nervously when they heard the *crunch* of footsteps on glass; Colin was sure the others felt as jumpy as he did.

“Did we hear a scream in here?” one of the Lehigh residents asked.

“Heather thought she saw a mouse,” Ben answered immediately. “I don’t know why she screamed so loud. Make sure everyone knows there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Any luck so far? There’s a lot of thirsty people out here.”

“Nope, I think the scavengers have already been through here,” Ben said. “Get everyone ready to leave, we’ll be out in a minute.”

The Lehigh resident walked out but Ben kicked sand over the dead person’s face anyway.

“A mouse?” Heather asked.

“We don’t need everyone panicking,” Ben said, “though I’m sure this won’t be the last dead body we find – murdered or otherwise. But it’s pretty clear we should avoid entering the city and get as far from here as possible.”

“We *shouldn’t* go into the city?” Hopkins asked as he regained his composure. “If there are murderers out there, we need to find a place to hide; there’d be plenty of places for that within city limits.”

“I’m sorry, Roy, but Ben is right,” Colin said. “The city is probably where the murderers are located, it would only make sense that gangs end up there. Not only should we avoid Phoenix, we should avoid *every* major metropolitan area from now on.”

Hopkins nodded in acceptance but didn’t leave the store without taking the one thing of value they found inside. Without a care for the corpse, he yanked the sharp metal pole out of the dead person’s chest before heading outside, where he convinced his group that skipping Phoenix was indeed the correct decision. Ben and Heather rushed to leave the store but Colin noticed something out of

the corner of his eye and jumped over the counter, where there was one item remaining in a small rack, the only shelving unit – albeit a tiny one – that still stood.

Once outside with the others, Colin unfolded the map of Arizona and figured out the group's location. They needed to take the I-17 North, which should be just ahead.

Nobody in the group questioned why Ben forced them to walk quicker than usual, especially since Hopkins was in agreement with the increased pace. Not long after leaving Phoenix behind, the group found several more corpses along the highway. Ben and Colin rushed to examine the dead bodies but were relieved that none appeared to be murdered. The rest of the seacraft survivors continued on without knowing the potential dangers they faced from the city, completely oblivious to the horrible scene inside the convenience store.

“Can we stop and rest?” asked one of the women, a former upper level guest.

“Not yet,” Roy barked at her, “not until we go a few more miles.”

Ben, Colin, Heather and Hopkins finally relaxed once Phoenix disappeared behind them; they didn't even care when dark storm clouds rolled overhead. In fact, the sudden rainstorm – which lasted only a few minutes before blowing over – was a welcomed nuisance for the survivors, who held out water bottles and other makeshift containers to catch as much water as possible. Everyone became drenched but nobody seemed to care except for Colin, who was careful to keep his newest prized possession – the map – dry. Not long after leaving the city limits, they found I-17 and turned north.

“If we'd run into any gangs, our group would've been easy to spot,” Heather said once she and Colin had a moment of privacy. “I'm not saying we should split away from everyone now, but it's something we need to keep an eye out for.”

“Don't worry, we'll take that opportunity when it presents itself,” he said. “But for now, we need to concentrate on the road

ahead.”

The area surrounding Interstate 17 was nearly as desolate as whatever highway they traveled their first few days. There were still no signs of human life – which might have been a good thing considering that other survivors might be murderous – but as Ben predicted, more debris appeared as the group traveled farther from the Pacific coast. Apparently, I-17 was a popular choice of escape during Earth’s final days before the comet strike. The group found more cars scattered about the highway. The large majority of vehicles was thoroughly destroyed as the ones found earlier, but a few intact cars gave them reason for hope.

With the storm clouds well behind, sun shined again and temperatures were warm enough so everyone quickly dried. The rest of the day was spent trudging along but as the sun began to dip in the sky, Ben and Hopkins eventually drifted toward the back of the group with Heather and Colin. The four discussed options for where they’d set up camp for the night.

“We need to find an area with a clear view behind and in front of us,” Hopkins said. Now that the former billionaire saw the dangers of this unknown, lawless world, he was more paranoid about every aspect of the group’s journey.

“You probably didn’t take notice but I’ve been picking spots like that since the first night I thought we were being followed,” Ben told him. “Colin and I have taken turns watching the road; now that you understand our need for safety, maybe you could take a shift for a few hours tonight.”

Hopkins nodded, feeling foolish that he’d been so unaware of danger the group faced from the moment they abandoned the seacraft and paddled ashore. They finally agreed on a spot as the sun disappeared from the sky, which changed into a beautiful shade of red and purple. Unfortunately, the picturesque sunset also led to a severe drop in temperature, the warmth of the day sucked right out of the air. Ben and Roy directed their respective groups down a small hill off the side of the highway, which they hoped would provide adequate cover in case intruders wandered by in the night. The two groups –

which hadn't intermingled much since Phoenix – had an unspoken agreement to put aside their differences for the sake of conserving body warmth; they all lumped together on the ground, many weary walkers closing their eyes and falling asleep within minutes.

"I'll take the first watch," Ben volunteered.

Hopkins looked up and down the highway before crossing to the opposite side, away from where the others rested.

"Where are you going?" Ben asked.

"Restroom break," Hopkins said before disappearing down the small ditch.

Heather yawned and Colin convinced her to join the others and save him a spot. He remained in the middle of the highway with Ben, who still peered into the distance.

"Sure you don't want me to take first shift?" Colin asked his friend. "I've gotten much more sleep than you the last few nights, I wouldn't mind staying up a while."

"That's okay, I wouldn't want Heather to get cold without you," Ben said.

Although Ben couldn't stop himself from making snide remarks about Heather, there was none of the usual malice in his voice. At this point, Colin wondered if his friend insulted his relationship with Heather simply out of habit. Colin hated that the two of them bickered and spoke badly about each other but he didn't have the energy to discuss that now. Instead, he stood and watched with his friend until the last of the day's light faded away.

"Does that look like something to you?" Ben suddenly asked.

While Colin was more interested in watching the highways behind them – after all, Phoenix wasn't *that* far in their past – Ben faced the opposite direction. At first, Colin saw nothing but darkness. But just before he was about to tell Ben this, he saw what appeared to be a puff of smoke approaching them, growing bigger with every passing second.

"What is that?" Colin wondered. "A sandstorm?"

"I don't know much about sandstorms but I don't think they're supposed to glow like that," Ben said with a rising sense of urgency. "I

think that's a car."

"Moving that fast?" Colin asked.

"There's not much traffic to deal with; I doubt the police will pull him over for speeding," Ben said. "As quick as he's moving, we probably only have a minute or two before he gets here. We have to warn everyone."

Ben and Colin rushed to the side of the road and told everyone that a car was approaching. There was plenty of nervous chatter but the two leaders quieted the crowd and told them all to lay flat and stay still, that darkness and the sloping hill should hide them.

"And the car is moving so fast the driver shouldn't be able to spot us," Ben assured them. "But everyone needs to stay quiet in case."

Colin panicked at first when he couldn't find Heather among the countless dozens but he eventually spotted her blonde hair and ran toward her, crouched over as he moved though the car was still far away. But after taking a final glance at the approaching high beams, he knew it wouldn't be long.

"Keep your head down the whole time," he whispered to Heather, taking handfuls of her long flowing hair and tucking it into the back of her shirt. "Sorry but your hair could brighten up a dark room."

The group heard the distant sound of the car's engine seconds later, as if a steel animal were searching for prey. Colin felt Heather's hand slip into his and squeeze hard; his heart pounded in his chest. He forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply. Common sense told him only a freak occurrence could lead to them being discovered.

And nobody in this group would be stupid enough to –

"Where's my husband?" a woman called out in the dark, her voice panicked.

Simultaneously, half the group *shushed* her but the woman did not quiet.

"I can't find my husband," she said. "Roy! Where are you?"

Colin recognized the voice of Roy Hopkins's wife and remembered the man going to the other side of the highway for a

restroom break. Colin didn't recall seeing the man return and instinctively let go of Heather's hand to crawl near the top of the hill. He saw that Ben did the same thing though the leader didn't want anyone else moving.

"Everyone stay down!" Ben hissed.

Ben and Colin looked down the highway and saw the car was moments from arriving.

"We can't do anything," Colin realized. "We just have to hope Roy is smart enough to stay down when he hears the noise."

"We need to do the same thing," Ben said.

With the car's high beams about to fall upon them, Ben and Colin ducked down, but not before both saw a stomach-churning sight: Roy Hopkins emerging from the other side of the road, a dumbfounded expression on his face – a face illuminated by headlights.

"This is going to be bad," Ben whispered, as the two lay next to each other on the ground, nothing else to look at but the hazy night sky.

"Maybe the car won't notice him," Colin said, though his optimism was feigned at best.

When the car *zoomed* by, Colin and Ben quickly lifted their heads over the edge of the hill and saw the glowing rear lights. But the driver slammed on the brakes and came to a loud *screeching* halt, spinning the wheel at the last second and whipping the car around.

"Roy, get over here!" Colin yelled at the shocked billionaire, who stood still as a statue on the other side of the road. He snapped out of his momentary shock and sprinted across the highway as the car approached.

"Everyone with weapons get up here now!" Ben said. "We have to defend ourselves!"

The car's headlights shined brightly on the dozen survivors armed with sharp sticks and jagged pieces of metal. Against a well-armed attack, Ben and Colin knew they'd have no chance but it was at least better to appear dangerous than weak. When the driver's door opened, they heard loud *barking* and saw a dog jump out and limp

toward them. The dog was big but its barking seemed more playful than threatening and it turned around when its master whistled. Stepping into the path of the high beams was a single man, strangely dressed but not very large. The man didn't appear armed and Ben saw nobody else inside the vehicle. Ben stepped forward to speak for his group.

"We have you outnumbered, friend, so don't try anything foolish," he warned.

"I don't want any problems," the stranger said. He slowly stepped closer until Ben could tell he was looking beyond him and toward the group of armed men behind him. "Did I just see Roy Hopkins?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

With Mansfield left behind to hide in the station's control room, President Marshall not only faced defiant crowds but actually helped them load two of the three remaining space shuttles. At first, the president considered forcing Mansfield to help as a way of making peace with the others, but quickly thought better of it, not wanting Peter's uncontrollable temper to sour the already frail relationship with the Russians and the group led by Lily and John. Besides, Marshall didn't need an extra distraction since he had a hard enough time dealing with the man in charge of the food supply, who was angry about his stash being raided despite the president's insistence that the remaining supply be equally distributed among everyone, including those about to leave.

While President Marshall wasn't having an easy time with the evacuation, there was one person more upset about how plans were proceeding. Even though there was a lot of work to be done, John Fare stayed in the cockpit of his shuttle, staring at Earth below while others worked around him. The last time the station passed over America, John and Lily spotted a storm system over the area they needed to land: the southwestern part of the country. Considering this part of the U.S. was most desert-like, it was John's luck that a rare storm would be happening when he most needed the weather to be clear. He insisted on going anyway but Lily refused to do so without proper conditions, giving John one more orbit for the storm to clear. As if time hadn't already moved slow enough, those next ninety minutes were pure torture. John couldn't start to think about focusing on supplies or passengers or anything else required to leave the station. Minutes before the station's orbit passed over America again, Lily and Slava showed up in the shuttle's cockpit.

"The weather still wasn't totally clear over Russia," John quickly pointed out. "A storm still looks possible."

"I think the worst of the weather has passed," Slava said. "Flying conditions are not perfect but I think it is safe enough to leave right away if you do not want to leave first."

“We *do* want to leave first,” John said.

“Only if the weather permits,” Lily quickly interjected. “And it looks like we’ll find that out in a few minutes.”

With nothing left to say, the three waited impatiently as the space station soared over North America. When the American Southwest came into sight, John saw what he felt was inevitable, another setback that seemed to be fate’s way of keeping him and Emily apart.

“That weather looks pretty bad,” Lily said, stating the obvious. “I’m sorry, John, but we still have to wait.”

“Then it is settled,” Slava said. “We will leave first. Our shuttle is fully loaded, I will hurry and inform my people to begin strapping in so we can leave once orbit takes us over Russia.”

Slava rushed from the cockpit and headed toward the shuttle docked at the next corner piece over.

“Are you going to say goodbye to everyone?” Lily asked.

John continued to stare out of the shuttle’s window, the hole in his chest widening with every minute he stayed on board. As the station moved beyond America again, he had no idea how much longer he’d have to wait until he found out whether or not his fiancée was still alive.

“I’ll be there in a couple minutes,” he lied.

Lily knew nothing would pull John away from the shuttle so she took off without him, heading down the hallway and into the next corner piece, where many Russians already filed aboard their shuttle. Because the large majority of Russians stayed to their section of the station over the years, there weren’t many goodbyes to be said and it was only a few minutes until Slava was the final person waiting to enter.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done, from helping build the station to keeping it safe, I’ll never forget what you’ve done for us,” President Marshall told the Russian leader as the two men shook hands. “Good luck on your return trip.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. President,” Slava said. “And thank you for allowing us to leave peacefully.”

The president nodded and backed away, allowing Lily to float toward her mentor. She'd known the day would come when she and Slava would go their separate ways but she never realized how difficult it would be to say goodbye. Lily still recalled the first day she met Slava at the space-construction program, the way he'd seen the potential in her, the way he'd taken her under his wing though she was the only female in the program. Had it not been for Slava's belief in her, Lily might never have succeeded and made it this far – and consequently, she might never have had the opportunity to seek refuge from Comet Clement aboard the space station.

"Thanks," Lily said simply. For all of her leadership ability and expertise, Lily never quite mastered how to properly deal with her emotions. "Thanks for everything."

"I knew from the first day I met you that you would succeed," Slava said. "I know now that you will continue to succeed. You have made me proud to be your teacher."

Slava and Lily hugged and the Russian passed through the airlock, not before offering one final message.

"Tell John I said goodbye and I hope he finds Emily safe," Slava said.

Lily was already forced to say goodbye to Wesley Maddox yet while this ending with Slava was a more hopeful one, it still didn't dull that she'd no longer have the two most important people in her life. As the airlock door closed, Lily fought to hold back tears; she could only do so because she'd soon see Peter Mansfield and didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

"Come on, Lily, let's head back to the control room to see them off," the president said. "We need to make sure the docking latch is released when the time comes."

Lily only had one friend left aboard the station but she assumed it would take an act of God to drag John out of his shuttle. But when she needed him most, he surprised her by being outside the control room when she and the president arrived.

“Figured I’d make sure everything went okay with the Russians,” he muttered. “Maybe we’ll learn something for our evacuation.”

Inside the control room, Mansfield quietly sulked until he saw John and Lily, at which time he angrily scowled at them.

“I guess the Russian *traitors* are first to leave?” he asked. “Shocking considering you two *traitors* started the mutiny.”

Lily’s first reaction was to argue back but she knew that was exactly what he wanted. Besides, Mansfield no longer had the power and influence he once did, which made him weak and pathetic as far as Lily was concerned, a defeated man whose only remaining ammunition was empty words meant to incite anger. But Lily did not give him the satisfaction, though she *did* make sure to smile at him. She could tell John was not quite so calm but she took him by the arm before he had the chance to explode on Mansfield.

“Ignore him,” she whispered to John. “He’s trying to make us mad because he can’t stop us from leaving.” With John calmed, Lily addressed Mansfield. “Actually, *Peter*, we came here to make sure the president’s orders to release the space shuttle are followed when the appropriate time comes.”

“Are *you* questioning *my* ability to follow orders?” Mansfield asked incredulously. “Isn’t that a bit hypocritical?”

“How could we trust you to do *anything* since you lie so much?” John snapped.

“I risked my life to find you during those crazy last days on Earth; I could’ve easily *disobeyed* orders and given up,” Mansfield said. “You’re here and alive because of me and this is how you repay me? I expected more from you, John, more than almost anyone else.”

John knew Mansfield was right and the fire of anger in his chest diminished. He never felt the same dislike for Mansfield that many others did, especially Lily. Still, that didn’t mean John’s desire to take a shuttle and return to Earth lessened in the slightest.

“I’m sorry for wanting to leave but this isn’t about you or me,” John said. “This is about Emily, and I can’t stop until I know what happened to her, even if that means putting myself at risk or ruining

your well-laid plans.”

John took his place at the control room’s big window, where he didn’t speak another word and stared down at Earth, lost in thought about his fiancée. He couldn’t believe so much time had passed – nearly 48 hours – since the fake ‘disaster’ led to Emily evacuating the station aboard *Destinee*; he crammed a lifetime of anxiety and concern into two days. Afraid that he’d suffer another emotional breakdown in front of the station’s main leaders, he forced his mind to stay positive, forced himself to think of the moment he and Emily would reunite, a moment that would come soon enough as long as the Russians didn’t miss their next opportunity to leave...

Tension hung over the control room like an uncomfortable fog; nobody spoke until Slava’s voice suddenly boomed over the radio.

“We have concluded our pre-flight safety checks,” the Russian said. “We are ready to begin startup procedures. How much time before the space station passes over Russia?”

The president, Mansfield and Lily turned toward John, who’d recently become an expert on gauging times in orbit since he spent so much time staring out windows.

“About thirty minutes,” John said.

“You have half an hour,” Mansfield said curtly into the radio.

“The startup procedures should take about twenty,” Slava said. “I’ll contact you once that’s done and we’re ready to release.”

“Copy that.”

“What happens if their startups aren’t done on time?” John asked.

“They’ll have to wait for the station to complete another orbit before leaving,” Mansfield said.

John was appalled by this news and looked to Lily for confirmation, hoping Mansfield said that to upset him. Unfortunately, her frown and nod confirmed the Russians could not have a delay.

“He’s right,” Lily said. “The shuttle doesn’t have enough fuel to fly far, that’s why we have to wait until we’re in the best orbital position to return to Earth.”

For the first time since Emily left, time passed quicker for John,

the next twenty minutes passing in a worried blur.

“What’s taking them so long?” he asked once the station began to soar closer to Eastern Russia. “Find out if they’re ready yet.”

“We shouldn’t be bothering them now,” Mansfield said. “We need to give them time to finish what they’re doing.”

“But they’re running out of time,” John said in a panic. “If they don’t disengage within the next few minutes, they’ll have to wait. We’ll *all* have to wait.”

Lily shouldered her way past Mansfield and took control of the radio. At first, Mansfield considered defending himself physically but smartly thought better of it. Instead, he floated toward the computer system Lily just abandoned.

“Slava, this is Lily,” she said. “Are you almost finished with the startup procedures? You’re running short on time.”

“This shouldn’t be rushed, Mr. President,” Mansfield complained. “Evacuations should *never* be rushed.”

“Tell that to *Destinee*,” John said.

Nothing but silence came from the radio for several minutes, during which time John saw Russia coming closer and closer, to the point where the station passed right above where they wanted.

“Procedures complete,” Slava finally said. “We’re ready to be released from the docking latch.”

John breathed a deep sigh of relief, knowing another few minutes would’ve been cause enough for a delay to the mission.

“Copy that, Slava, releasing the latch now,” Lily said. “Peter?”

Floating in front of the computer system, Mansfield smiled defiantly at Lily yet did not make a move to disengage the shuttle’s release hatch.

“Peter, the latch,” the president ordered. “This is not the time for games.”

Mansfield hesitated a few more seconds until Lily sighed and angrily floated toward him. At that moment, Peter pushed a single button and smiled again.

“What did you do?” Lily asked. “I swear, if you sabotaged this in any way I’ll make sure you –”

“Docking latch released,” Mansfield said.

Lily checked the computer systems to make sure but they saw the shuttle float away from the station moments later. For the next several minutes, they watched the shuttle drift away before its engines began to glow, while Lily communicated with Slava about every step in the spacecraft’s journey. It wasn’t long before the station was too far for them to see the shuttle as it soared toward Earth’s atmosphere, leaving the three men to listen to play by play from Slava.

“We’re approaching the atmosphere now,” Slava yelled over the loud sound of the shuttle tearing into Earth’s uppermost skies. “The weather appears to be clear, not as.... –e thought.”

As with the transmissions from *Destinee*, the radio communication became choppy once the shuttle entered Earth’s atmosphere. This time, the broadcast went dead quicker than with the ISU craft.

“Slava, do you read me?” Lily asked. “Please, come in if you hear this.”

But after several minutes of waiting in silence, they realized they’d never again hear the voice of Slava Kovalchuk.

“Didn’t sound good. *Again*,” Mansfield said with a bit too much satisfaction. “Are you sure you want to risk leaving, too?”

John stared daggers through Mansfield but Lily could tell how upset he must feel.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, John,” she said supportively. “In fact, comm loss with the Russians probably means good news for *Destinee*.”

The three men looked confused.

“And how do you figure *that*?” Mansfield asked, clearly doubting Lily’s reasoning.

“Because *Destinee* also lost comm upon entering Earth’s atmosphere, like the shuttle,” Lily explained. “And since Slava didn’t report problems with the shuttle before the line went dead, it’s safe to say the radio issues are coming from our end, not from the shuttle or *Destinee*.”

“Just keep in mind that faulty radio equipment doesn’t explain

how a spacecraft can land safely on rough terrain,” Mansfield quickly pointed out.

Despite his constant attempts to instill pessimism in John and Lily, the two ignored him and continued to make their own plans.

“Now it’s our turn to start planning,” Lily said. “I know you aren’t going to like this, John, but we have to wait a few more orbits until the weather clears and dawn hits the southwest. If we have any chance of finding *Destinee*, we’ll need to see where we’re going.”

John couldn’t bear the idea of waiting that long but his brain reminded his heart that it was the smart move, that Lily would do what was best for him and everyone else. With nothing left to accomplish or watch in the control room, John excused himself to return to his shuttle, where he planned to wait until it was time for them to leave, too.

“You really expect to find *Destinee*?” Mansfield asked as John was leaving. “You traitors are more foolish than I thought.”

John appeared on the verge of attacking Mansfield but he held himself back and offered one more thought before he left.

“I’m *not* sorry for wanting to leave this place.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Andrew Brighton's fear of the wolves quickly turned to shock when he recognized Andrei, the young killer who escaped during the surface mission years earlier and survived the harsh surface since. Andrei stood in the middle of the pack and appeared to have some sort of central leadership position among the animals, a role Andrew hoped might save his family.

"Please, Andrei, don't hurt us," Brighton pleaded. "I saved your life once when everyone was calling for your head, please do the same for me and my family."

At first, Andrei didn't seem to understand anything being said to him; he wore a similar snarl as the rest of the wolves. But his face softened as the words registered in his mind, though that did nothing to stop a few wolves slowly inching forward.

"AJ, stay behind me," Katina said, trying to stand in front of her son to shield him though AJ was bigger than his mother.

"I can protect myself," AJ said defiantly. He tried to step in front of his mother but she had none of that.

"AJ, shut up and do as I say!" his mother hissed.

"Andrei, don't do this," AJ called out from behind his protector. "We used to be friends, remember?"

"AJ?" Andrei asked, surprised when he looked at the youngest Brighton. His voice was hoarse from lack of use. "This is really you?"

"Please, Andrei, call them off," AJ said.

Andrei did nothing but silently stand in place while most in his group continued to stalk ahead. The majority of wolves – especially those that snarled the fiercest – were gaunt and did not look like they'd eaten much for a long time, which was why they stared at the Brightons with fervid excitement. The only two wolves that stayed near the back were nowhere near as thin as their counterparts and did not move aggressively toward Andrew, the man who'd fed them for years.

Andrei suddenly whistled and when the wolves looked at him, he took a few steps back, as if showing his intention to retreat. A few

wolves paused but most turned back toward the cornered family and continued to inch forward.

“Tell them to back off, Andrei, please!” Andrew yelled.

“I am sorry but wolfs do not listen to me when they are so hungry,” Andrei said. “We have not eat much for long time. Maybe I keep them back if you give us one of you for food.”

“You expect us to sacrifice one of us to feed you?” Andrew asked, horrified by the idea.

“Is only way two of you will live,” Andrei said matter-of-factly.

The Brightons continued to inch closer to the river’s edge as the wolves moved forward. They were quickly running out of room; someone needed to make a decision and soon. There appeared only one choice to make and AJ was the one to suggest it.

“We’re going to have to swim for it.”

“Didn’t you see what happened to the stick I threw in the river?” his mother asked.

“I’d rather deal with rapids than what those wolves are about to do,” AJ said.

As if on cue, a few of the wolves again *growled* loudly, baring razor-sharp teeth intended for the Brightons.

“He’s right,” Andrew said. “We can’t hesitate. Get ready because we have to go *now*!”

As one, the family turned and sprinted toward the riverbank, which now seemed farther than it had moments before. AJ peeked behind them and saw his father quickly falling behind, his injured ankle slowing him down.

“Run!” his father yelled when he saw AJ looking back. “Don’t slow down!”

Though the wolves might’ve been gaunt and hungry, their collective energy did not suffer as a result, especially when they realized a potential meal was escaping. AJ saw the animals cut his family’s lead in half in the matter of seconds; he doubted his father would reach the water in time. AJ made a sudden decision to turn and separate from his parents, who raced toward the corner where the rivers split. He took a slightly longer route toward the water and

yelled at the wolves to distract them from easier prey.

“AJ! No!” his mother yelled when she noticed too late that her soon changed course.

“I’m fine, keep going!” he called back.

Another glance behind showed that his ploy worked, as the wolves focused on the single prey that moved away from the others. AJ was relieved to see he bought his parents a few extra seconds but the sight of so many hungry wolves bearing down on him – not to mention the riverbank farther than before – made him realize he might not make it. He stumbled on a rock and barely kept his footing though he lost more of his precious – and quickly diminishing – lead in the process. AJ knew that looking back wouldn’t help him run faster so he kept his head down and made sure nothing else slowed him. He pumped his legs and arms like never before and saw the riverbank getting closer. His running jostled free a strap of his backpack but he held on with his other hand. He considered dropping the bag – to speed up *and* to distract the wolves – but he wasn’t ready to give up his few remaining worldly possessions.

Even though noise from the raging river grew louder the closer AJ got, he still heard the *huffing* and *puffing* of wolves, which sounded right on his heels. He expected to be tackled from behind at any second but resisted the urge to look back. Amazingly, AJ reached the river’s edge without being caught but didn’t have a split second to worry about the rapids he was about to challenge. Without hesitation, he flung himself off the riverbank and soared toward the water, relieved he’d gotten away but suddenly concerned about the drop into the water, which was much farther than he expected.

I hope the water is deep enough, AJ thought as he fell twelve feet to splash down.

All the air was ripped from AJ’s lungs when he hit the water, caused by a combination of the far drop and near-freezing water temperature. It didn’t help that rapids made it difficult to swim to the surface, especially since he was swimming one-handed while struggling to hold his backpack with the other. Once he fought his way to the surface, he gasped for air and worked hard to keep himself

from being pulled under. It was years since the last time he went swimming and the pool at his father's private club had much smoother swimming conditions.

As he was quickly swept down the river, AJ desperately tried to see over the rapids to make sure his parents made it safely – *if this is considered safe* – into the water. He might've spotted one of his parents' heads at one point but it was hard just controlling himself, just keeping himself from being dragged under. AJ suddenly felt a tug on his backpack, which he struggled to hold onto in one hand that dragged behind him. He kept his eyes aimed ahead to check for rocks but when he tried to pull the pack onto his shoulder, he discovered serious resistance. When he finally glanced back, he saw why.

That he didn't instinctively release the backpack was incredible, especially since one of the wolves had its teeth firmly locked onto it. The animal appeared less threatening now that it was drenched but its sharp teeth ripped at the bag and proved that it was still a force to be reckoned with. AJ knew it would be smarter to let go of it and break any link with the predator but he was too mad to give up, he'd done too much to hold onto his belongings.

"Let go!" he yelled, choking on water that rushed into his mouth as his head was repeatedly pulled under. Between the rapids, frigid water and the battle with the wolf, AJ's energy quickly drained and he found it harder to tread water. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the wolf, who continued to thrash so wildly that AJ could see his bag tearing apart. He put up the best fight possible but it was clear he wouldn't stop his belongings being ripped out. AJ finally gave up and let go, finding it easier to tread water with the use of both his arms. But the wolf apparently wasn't happy with his prize and knew the pack was no substitute for the meal it could make of AJ.

AJ watched with fear – and frustration – as his backpack was quickly swept away and the wolf began to paddle toward him. He tried to swim toward the other side of the river but that would've been a tough task in the most ideal conditions let alone rapids. He barely swam ten feet before his arms felt like they were stuck in cement and he began to spend more time underwater. The wolf

must've sensed its prey was weakening by the moment because it didn't slow its pursuit. AJ tried to think of Irena to give the needed strength but his body wasn't able to do what his mind wanted; he soon saw the wolf feet away – its bared teeth bigger up close – and hoped the end would be quick and painless.

“No!”

AJ heard the yell even as he dipped underwater. It took him a moment to realize *he* hadn't been the one that screamed. Once his tired mind recognized the voice, he kicked hard and forced himself above the water, where he expected the animal to be on him. Instead, he saw a tangle of human and animal limbs being swept away in front of him. His mother wrestled the wolf, both tossed about in the rapids. AJ knew this couldn't end well for her so he mustered the will to swim forward and help. But when Katina made eye contact with her son and realized what he was doing, she forced the wolf's head underwater long enough to yell at AJ.

“Don't come closer, swim toward shore!”

The wolf popped its head above water at that moment and snapped at Katina's arm, causing her to cry out in pain. AJ didn't care about her warning but his father suddenly arrived out of nowhere and helped his wife, not before repeating the same order to their son.

“Go, AJ!” he called out over the *roar* of the rapids, which suddenly sped up.

AJ tried to watch the water-swept battle but he suddenly struck a rock, which violently jarred his body and took away his ability to breathe. He slipped under the water again and found his desire to move nearly non-existent. He was on the verge of giving up but saw more debris underwater, debris he could only avoid by swimming upward. When he surfaced this time, he struggled to take a deep breath and anxiously searched for his parents, though they – and the wolf – were nowhere to be seen. He couldn't look for long, though, as he had to focus on the rocks and debris littering this part of the river. AJ desperately tried to maneuver to safety but the rapids moved too fast and he was too slow to avoid hitting things; he was like the ball in a deadly game of pinball. He braced himself enough to absorb most

impact but his weakened body was taking a serious beating. The only thing that kept him going was that these rapids weren't only sweeping him forward but sideways, as he unknowingly crossed a large majority of the river. Before he knew it, AJ saw the banks of the far shore and though he still had little energy, the rapids in this section slowed enough so he had an easier time keeping himself above water.

Finally able to think again, AJ turned around in time to see his parents still struggling to keep the thrashing wolf at bay while being smashed about on rocks and debris. It was clear they were in trouble so despite concern for his own safety, he started to swim toward faster part of the river. He barely made it a few feet when he heard a loud noise – one even louder than the raging rapids – and glanced up toward the sky above. As water sloshed around his head, AJ somehow spotted an odd aircraft streaking across the sky, moving far too quickly to be the helicopter. His heart leapt at the idea that life survived somewhere, that civilization survived enough to launch such an impressive aircraft. Within seconds, the aircraft soared out of view, leaving only a trail of smoke in its wake and hope in AJ's heart.

But that hope was instantly extinguished when he turned back to the river and saw his parents farther away; one of them appeared to be floating facedown. He called out but before he went much farther, he felt a presence looming just ahead. AJ turned in time to see a large rock in his path but it was too late to avoid hitting it. He tried throwing his arms over his head to protect himself but he was too slow; he smashed into it. Stars appeared before his eyes and AJ felt a new liquid running down his face – blood. Despite how much he wanted to reach his parents and help, he suddenly felt separated from his body and ended up on his back, staring at the streak of smoke in the sky just before going completely black...

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“How do you know who I am?” Roy Hopkins asked the stranger, a mixture of confusion, fear and flattery in his voice.

The oddly dressed man remained a safe distance from Hopkins, Colin, Ben and other armed seacraft survivors. The headlights from his vehicle shined on the dozen people in front of him but he could see little beyond them. The large dog sat protectively in front of the man and growled at those in front of him.

“It’s okay, Real, you don’t need to be worried,” the stranger said, patting his dog’s head. “We don’t have anything to fear from these people.”

Ben stepped forward and spoke more threateningly than Colin would’ve liked.

“And how do you know you have nothing to fear?” he asked. “How do you know we aren’t dangerous?”

Although the stranger was short and physically unassuming, there was something eerie about him, not the least of which was that he wore black sunglasses though it was dark out. Regardless of his size, he survived in a post-comet world, which *had* to make him more dangerous than he appeared. He slowly turned toward Ben and broke out into a wide grin.

“No offense to Mr. Hopkins, but I *highly* doubt the man has turned into a vicious killer over the years,” the stranger said with a chuckle.

“How do you know who I am?” Hopkins repeated.

The stranger hesitated a moment before starting to pet his dog again.

“I used to be a big sports fan,” he said. “Anyone who knows anything about sports knows that Roy Hopkins once owned several professional sports teams. Didn’t you used to get fined all the time for complaining about referees?”

Neither Ben nor Colin could resist the urge to laugh at that thought, as constant complaining was obviously a ‘skill’ Hopkins hadn’t yet lost.

“Where did you get the car?” Colin asked.

“Found it,” the stranger answered. “There are plenty of cars sitting around highways across the country. The majority of them have been destroyed but there are plenty that somehow survived. You’d be surprised how many have keys in the ignition and still work.”

“We’ve been checking some so far but there hasn’t been many to choose from and none had keys,” Colin explained.

“You’re still pretty close to the coast, not a big selection in those parts. Almost everything, including the cars, was washed out to the ocean,” the stranger said. “There will be plenty of times when you’re unlucky and there won’t be anything to drive so I’d get used to walking.”

“Believe me, we have,” Hopkins said. “We’ve been walking more than two days straight.”

“A *whole* two days?” the stranger asked, laughing unapologetically. “Well, at least it’s good exercise. Now I need to ask you a question: where are you coming from and why do you all look so normal? Most other survivors I’ve come across look like me. It’s almost like you’re from the world *before* the comet hit.”

As the stranger asked that, it was hard not to notice his head on a swivel, looking around and beyond Ben’s group, as if he could sense other survivors hiding nearby.

“Are you looking for something?” Ben asked suspiciously.

The stranger grinned again.

“Buddy, you don’t survive in this world as long as I have without having good instincts for when you’re being watched,” the stranger said. “And I *know* there’s more people close by than just you fellas.”

“We could learn a lot from you about survival,” Colin said.

“You’re right about that,” the stranger agreed.

Colin turned around to check if he could see the others, but the headlights did not shine brightly enough to make out the dozens of people hiding on the downslope of the hill beside the highway.

“What can you tell us about other survivors you’ve come

across?” Ben asked. “Are there other dangerous people nearby?”

“In this area? Not that I’ve seen,” the stranger said.

The stranger still hardly looked in Ben’s direction, which annoyed the leader who was used to his people focusing on him. The stranger seemed more interested in Hopkins and the others hiding nearby.

“What are you looking for?” Ben asked.

“It’s just been me and Real for so many years that I get excited to see new people,” the stranger said. “There haven’t been many survivors and the majority of them haven’t been too friendly, *certainly* not as interesting or famous person like Roy Hopkins. You still haven’t explained why none of you look as dirty and scruffy as me and other comet survivors.”

“We haven’t exactly been living on the surface,” Colin answered. “In fact, we’ve only been in America a few days now.”

Ben turned angrily toward his friend; Colin knew Ben didn’t want him to give details to the stranger. But Colin wasn’t nearly as suspicious as Ben was, especially since the stranger would’ve attacked by now if that had been his intention.

“Then where were you?” the stranger asked.

“I don’t know how much we should say,” Ben said.

“What does it matter at this point? The craft is gone and there’s no reason to keep it a secret,” Colin countered. “We lived aboard a large underwater seacraft the last five years, deep in the oceans to protect us from the comet.”

“Where is that seacraft now?” the stranger wondered.

“Actually, something happened that –”

“It’s gone,” Ben said, interrupting Colin. “A few passengers wanted to stay aboard and continue life on the high seas so they sailed away. But the majority of us wanted to get to land now that conditions improved on the surface.”

“Not everyone got off?” the stranger asked.

Ben noted an odd sense of concern in the man’s voice.

“Like I said, a few wanted to stay aboard so that’s what happened,” Ben said curtly, making it clear he no longer wanted to

discuss the topic.

“I’m sure how *we* got here isn’t as interesting as *your* story,” Colin said, though he knew the seacraft’s story was just as amazing. “You’re the first survivor we’ve come across so we’d love to hear any advice you could give about how to survive.”

The stranger still appeared concerned as he stared beyond Colin and Ben’s group but he eventually smiled.

“Sure, I’d love to help your people,” the stranger said affably. “But as I’m sure you understand, I get a bit paranoid when I know there are people out there I can’t see. I’d at least like to meet the others in your group first.”

“For what?” Ben asked.

“My peace of mind,” the stranger said. “I need to make sure my dog and I feel safe before I walk among you.”

“But I thought you weren’t threatened by us,” Ben challenged.

The stranger’s smile faded.

“You are asking for *my* help, not the other way around. If I meant you and your people harm, I would’ve driven by and not stopped to see what I could do,” the stranger said. “Would you like me to continue on my way?”

Ben did not answer right away but Colin wasn’t about to lose the opportunity of learning from a true survivor.

“Everyone can come out now,” Colin called out. “It’s safe.”

It took a few seconds for the first of the seacraft’s hiding passengers to emerge from the shadows. But within minutes, dozens of nervous people stepped forward. Even though the dog growled lowly, the stranger’s smile was inviting, as he looked from face to face, sure to study every person that approached.

Once the passengers felt comfortable that they were in no danger, they circled around the stranger and listened breathlessly as he regaled them with his amazing tale of survival. Even Ben and the dog – both equally suspicious by the sudden appearance of newcomers – relaxed long enough to listen.

“A few days before the comet struck, a man I once knew told me about a bomb shelter he knew of,” the stranger told his captivated audience. “It was far from where I intended to wait out the comet strike but I figured it was my best chance to survive. Did any of you experience what America was like during those few days before Clement arrived?”

Colin raised his hand.

“I was the last person to board the seacraft,” he said. “I drove along the entire West Coast to take my spot aboard.”

The stranger stared at Colin – at least that’s what Colin thought, though he couldn’t see the man’s eyes behind dark sunglasses – for several long moments until the familiar grin reappeared on his face.

“Ahh, yes, I remember now,” the stranger said, raising more than a few eyebrows among the crowd, including Colin.

“You remember what?” Colin asked.

“I remember how hectic those final days were, as I’m sure you do,” the stranger said, continuing with his story. He went on to describe how he barely survived his long road trip and eventually found an abandoned puppy, which he took with him and named Real. The shelter was little more than an oversized basement built deeper beneath the surface but it was well stocked with supplies. When the comet struck, the stranger explained how the ground shook for hours on end, causing the shelter to crumble around him. “I didn’t think I would make it past that first day but I was too concerned with protecting Real to worry for my own safety.”

“I know what that’s like,” Colin interjected, thinking about the way he put his life on the line to protect Heather the day the comet struck. But that was a story he never told Ben and he could feel his friend looking at him. “That’s something we *all* can relate to. The seacraft got caught in a tsunami after the strike and we were nearly smashed to death. In fact, not everyone aboard was lucky enough to survive.”

“You suffered fatalities on your boat?” the stranger asked with genuine concern.

Colin again felt Ben's eyes burning a hole in the side of his head, as he brought up another topic he did *not* want to discuss at the moment.

"Yes, a few," he answered shortly. "But please continue your story."

The stranger proceeded to tell them how he and the dog managed to survive even though he lost power and lights for quite a while. It took the man years to dig out of the bunker and when he finally reached the surface, he found the land completely barren and covered in several feet of snow.

"Everything was gone and there was just a big hole in the ground where the house used to be," the stranger explained. "The surrounding trees were scorched and bent at extreme angles but amazingly, the car I drove there survived almost intact."

Several months later, the stranger took his remaining supplies and headed in a southwestern direction, hoping to find that life survived in the warmer part of the country. Along the way, he encountered plenty of difficulties and nearly died on several occasions, be it from freezing weather conditions or starvation. But the incident that stuck out most in his mind involved his first foray into a major city.

"Memphis, Tennessee," the stranger said. "I figured a city would be my best chance to find supplies but the only thing I found was trouble...*serious* trouble."

He described the gang he encountered and the way those insane people wanted to take Real as food, which was equally disturbing to the seacraft survivors. The stranger barely escaped the city by leaping from one side of a broken bridge to the other, but not before Real was shot in the leg with an arrow.

"There was a point I didn't think he was going to make it," the stranger said, his voice cracking with emotion. "But he's tougher than I could ever be and barely limps when he runs. But if there was one good thing about Memphis, it was one of the most important lessons I learned about how to survive: avoid major cities."

"We learned that about a dozen miles back with Phoenix,"

Colin said.

“Arizona? Hmm, didn’t realize I made it that far,” the stranger said. “But you have to prepare yourself for war if you enter those cities since many survivors end up there and quickly have to fight for their lives. Those people are prepared to do *anything* they must to survive, something that I never felt comfortable with. That’s why I’ve stuck to the highways, stuck to the roads leading west.

“Besides the cities, the rest of the country is mostly barren and there have been times I’ve gone weeks without seeing another human. I’ve *also* seen a lot of debris, including some strange things nowhere near where they should’ve been: I’m talking miles away from where some of this stuff once was, even *states* away in some circumstances. The level of devastation has been impressive,” the stranger continued. “Most smaller towns look like they been wiped off the face of the planet.”

Several loud groans escaped the crowd; everyone was distraught at the idea of *their* small town being completely destroyed.

“But in fairness, I’ve never wandered far from the major roads so there might be plenty of areas still intact,” the stranger added upon seeing disappointment among the crowd. “The most important thing I can tell you is to stay careful at all times, stay suspicious of danger at all times because you’re never truly safe in this new world.”

Once the stranger was finished his story, he walked among the crowd and spoke to some of the passengers, recognizing many former upper-level guests, even those wealthy people who might not have been in the public eye so much.

“He seems to know who so many of these people are,” Ben said. “Is it normal that he remembers them all?”

“If he survived this long on the surface, he must be a smart guy,” Heather added. “So maybe he was a smart guy *before* the comet strike and followed the news. These *were* some of the most influential Americans.”

“Yeah, *maybe*,” Ben said snidely before abruptly leaving Heather and Colin alone. The two watched Ben follow the stranger and his dog around the rest of the seacraft crowd.

“It *does* seem like he’s looking for something, doesn’t it?” Heather asked.

“I don’t know, maybe he’s glad to have friendly people to talk to,” Colin said.

When the stranger was finished making his rounds, he ended up back in front of Colin, who noticed a slight look of disappointment on the man’s face – at least the part of his face Colin could see.

“Heather Sanders, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” the stranger said.

“Is there anyone you *don’t* remember?” she asked.

“My memory is about the only thing I still have left,” he said. “When that goes, then I’ll start worrying. Do you mind if I talk to your friend in private for a moment?”

“Sure,” Heather said before blending in with the crowd.

“I noticed that you seem reluctant to go into detail about what happened aboard your seacraft,” the stranger said. “Your friend is too suspicious to tell me anything, which I suppose is the safe way to be. But I was wondering if there was anything else you could tell me in private. The idea of living on a seacraft for that long sounds incredible to me.”

Colin looked back at the crowd and saw Ben entrenched in conversation with his fellow Lehigh residents, undoubtedly talking about the stranger’s news about the extinction of smaller towns. While the group as a whole seemed deflated by the news, Colin was surprised they weren’t in more of a panic, though he figured Hopkins and his crew might use that information as ammo at a later time.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m thankful the seacraft gave me a chance to live but there were many hard years spent aboard,” Colin explained. “Originally, the government placed an admiral in charge but the owner of the seacraft mutinied soon after the tsunami nearly destroyed us. The admiral was imprisoned and his guards killed and the seacraft owner started his reign of tyranny.”

“Somebody *owned* the seacraft?” the stranger asked. “The government didn’t build it?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not sure what sort of relationship the

owner had with the government but Ainsworth was only allowed to select half the passengers,” Colin said. “And believe me, he made life hell for those he didn’t choose.”

“Ainsworth?” the stranger asked.

At the mention of that name, the man’s dog growled again but calmed when the stranger patted his head.

“Tyler Ainsworth, he was the owner,” Colin continued. “And he was about as ruthless as they come. He single-handedly killed numerous people on board in cold blood, including Bernard Jones.”

“The computer mogul?” the man asked, clearly shocked.

“Yes, and he was also responsible for the death of my friend’s sister,” Colin said. “When that happened, the government-chosen passengers finally had enough and rebelled against him. Once we took control of the craft, things got better for everyone aboard and we lived in peace for the last few years until arriving here in America.”

“So when you took control of the seacraft, what happened to Ainsworth? Did your friend kill him for what happened to his sister?”

“I’m sure he wanted to,” Colin said. “But Ben didn’t lower himself to Ainsworth’s level.”

“I sensed your exit from the seacraft wasn’t as smooth as you made it seem,” the stranger said.

Colin was impressed – maybe even slightly disturbed – by how well the stranger read the situation.

“You’re right, our evacuation did not go as planned,” Colin said. “Once we reached the coast, we planned to wait until the weather became warmer before abandoning the comforts of the boat. But the few people who stayed on board betrayed the rest of us so they could get rid of us and take the seacraft. They faked an emergency – that we were sinking – and waited until we were gone before sailing off.”

“Don’t tell me that Ainsworth was one of the conspirators,” the stranger said.

Colin could tell the stranger was as sickened by Ainsworth as the rest of them, a reaction that caused just from hearing stories about him. *I wonder what he would’ve thought of Tyler if he got screwed over by*

him like the rest of us, Colin thought. The stranger seemed like a friendly enough guy but if he survived this long on the surface, Colin was sure he had to have a mean streak to him.

“Tyler *was* one of the conspirators,” Colin said. “In fact, he was the one who coordinated the entire scheme.”

“So he’s gone?” the stranger asked, his voice as distraught as the sound of the dog’s whine.

Though Colin felt guilty for leaving Ainsworth behind – and likely condemning him to death – it felt good to tell the stranger this next part of the story.

“Ainsworth *is* gone but he’s not aboard the seacraft,” he said with great satisfaction. “He needed the help of Bernard Jones’s son to fake the catastrophe but the kid ended up double-crossing him and kicking him off the boat with the rest of us.”

“Then where is he? I didn’t see him with the group,” the stranger asked with a sense of urgency.

“Do you know him or something?”

“No, of course not. I just didn’t see anyone who looked like an outcast from the rest of your group,” the stranger said.

Colin didn’t know how but he had the feeling this strange man was lying to him. For the first time, he began to understand why Ben was suspicious, though Colin still didn’t feel threatened.

“Tyler is farther back that way,” he said, pointing behind them. “The group came to the decision of separating from him. He must be miles behind with this guy Earl, who his only ally.”

The stranger turned toward the empty road and Colin saw his face light up, though that had nothing to do with the car’s high beams shining directly on him.

“Where are you headed with your people?” the stranger asked once he refocused on Colin.

“Most of the group is headed toward Kansas. The government’s passengers come from a little town called Lehigh and they’re determined to get back to their homes, though I’m sure many are having serious doubts now whether the place exists anymore,” Colin said.

“Don’t give up hope, that’s the only thing you can hold onto out here,” the stranger said. “And believe me, stranger things have happened, things you never might’ve expected to happen.”

“I hope Lehigh still exists but I’m not sure I plan on going that far,” Colin said. “My girlfriend and I are on the lookout for a safe place to settle down.”

“I know the perfect place for you then.”

The stranger proceeded to tell Colin about a growing community – a safe, *walled* community – that sprung up in New Mexico. The man spent some time there with a great group of people and it almost sounded too good to be true.

“Why didn’t you stay if it was so perfect?” Colin wondered.

“I still felt there was something else I had to do,” the stranger said. “But one day, I hope to find my way back.”

“What is it you have to do?” Colin asked.

“Believe me, John, you don’t want to know.”

“John? My name isn’t John,” Colin said. He immediately thought of his best friend and recalled the first few months aboard the seacraft when he impersonated John Fare. *Why did he call me John of all names?*

“It’s not?”

“Nobody has called me that in years,” Colin said. “Why did you?”

“Sorry, friend, I thought I heard someone say that,” the stranger said, though it was clear to both that he was lying. “But I really do have to get going. Tell everyone I said goodbye and good luck on your trip. Maybe we’ll run into each other one day.”

The stranger hurried toward his car and whistled for the dog to follow, which he did obediently. Colin’s mind suddenly raced with the unlikely thought that this man somehow knew him. But before he realized what was happening, the stranger already reached his driver-side door and climbed into the car.

“Wait, where are you going?” Colin called out as he jogged after the man.

“To do something that should’ve been done a long time ago,”

the stranger called out. “Good luck.”

With that, the man shut the door and slammed on the gas, peeling tires as he sped off toward Phoenix, leaving Colin and the rest of his people in the dark night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Waiting inside the empty space shuttle quickly got old for John, especially once all supplies were loaded and people no longer floated in and out. Having slept only a few hours the last few days, John was exhausted – physically *and* mentally – but he refused to let himself sleep again until he found Emily. Lily suggested he get some rest since it would still be hours before they left but John ignored her advice. But once he found himself nodding off, he had to do something to stay awake so he left the shuttle and floated through the station’s hallways, mostly empty since anyone with common sense was getting a final night of rest.

John’s mind inevitably invoked memories of his years spent aboard the station, wonderful times that suddenly came to an end in such an unfortunate manner. As a young kid – when George Marshall first announced the creation of a space station – John dreamed of traveling to the space station. Not only had he fulfilled that dream, but he also learned to spacewalk and work on the station, not to mention meeting the love of his life here. He floated by his pod but again refused to enter the room he shared with Emily for so long. Instead, he continued his aimless floating, though he still ended up back in the space shuttle’s cockpit every ninety minutes to check weather conditions in America.

Once the long hours ticked away and John saw the first of the passengers come out of their rooms, he didn’t hesitate to rush them into getting their belongings ready to go as soon as possible. He immediately headed toward Lily’s pod and did not leave until she finally emerged after her extended nap. Lily appeared sleepy but not surprised to see John waiting.

“How long have you been here?” she asked.

“The weather’s been completely clear the last two orbits over the Southwest,” John reported. “I’ve already started directing passengers toward the shuttle so we can leave as soon as dawn breaks over America.”

Lily knew their departure couldn’t be rushed but rather than

waste time trying to convince John, she decided to put him to use. She gave him the list of passengers and put him in charge of ensuring that everyone boarded the shuttle. John attacked this chore with every ounce of energy that remained in him and instantly headed back toward the shuttle, where droves of passengers began to show up of their own accord. Once many names were crossed off, John took it upon himself to scour the space station and find those who still hadn't shown up. The task was not easy since John didn't know the location of many passengers' rooms. But once he tracked down the final person on the list, Lily had enough time to complete what she needed.

With the final passenger in tow, John entered the corner piece and found Lily waiting outside the airlock with President Marshall and Peter Mansfield.

"Please hurry inside and get seated," John told the final passenger. "There's little time."

"There's still another hour before the space station orbits America," Mansfield said. "You have plenty of time."

"We can't waste a single minute if we're going to complete startup procedures without taking the risk of missing our next opportunity," John argued.

Lily recognized John's franticness and needed him to stay focused for just a few more minutes.

"Why don't you go inside and make sure everyone is properly strapped in and their belongings are tied down?" Lily said.

John nodded and floated into the airlock without so much as a goodbye to the president or Mansfield.

"Looks like someone's in a rush," Mansfield said. "You better not let him affect the way you fly."

Lily knew this was as close to a safety warning as she'd ever receive from Peter Mansfield. But nobody needed to remind her that caution was key, especially since her flying experience was dangerously limited – non-existent for flights returning to Earth. As part of her space training, Lily spent hours in flight simulators but nobody ever expected she'd be forced into a situation where she'd be put in charge of a shuttle. But with the death of one of the station's

pilots in the missile attack and Captain Michael Martin's kamikaze mission that destroyed the Chinese station, only one true pilot remained and that man was already tapped to fly the presidential shuttle in six months. Lily successfully flew one of the shuttles from the moon to the space station but knew that landing on Earth would be much more difficult. Therefore, there was no warning anyone could give that she hadn't already thought of herself.

"We won't hold you up any longer or John might take off without you," the president said. "Good luck and please be careful."

"And make sure you find *Destinee* and help them dig the runway for us," Mansfield added, receiving an angry look from the president. "What? *Someone* should have a smooth landing."

While Lily tried to convince herself she could land the shuttle, doubt started to creep into her mind; butterflies flapped wildly inside her stomach. She was such a control freak – needed a specific order to everything she did – that the unknowns in this mission bothered her most. Without contact from *Destinee*, they couldn't know for sure where the ISU craft landed and therefore only had an estimated landing zone. Lily knew that quick thinking would be required during the shuttle's final descent and quick thinking often led to mistakes.

And mistakes during this flight could lead to death, she thought gravely. Still, Lily didn't want to give Mansfield the satisfaction of knowing she had doubts.

"Make sure you two aren't too hard on the station the next six months, there won't be anyone to fix it," Lily said. "I'll see you back on Earth."

With that, Lily took a final glance around the space station – one last glance at the incredible structure she played such an integral role in constructing and maintaining – before entering the airlock.

Although Lily only stayed outside the airlock a few minutes longer than John, she found everyone strapped in and ready to go by the time she entered the shuttle, including John inside the cockpit. Since there was nobody else aboard the station with flight experience,

John was Lily's only copilot option, despite that he'd only flown in a shuttle one time in his life. But the two worked well together and Lily realized it didn't matter who was sitting next to her; if something bad happened, nobody else aboard the shuttle would be able to save them.

"System checks," she told John.

"I don't know what those are for a shuttle," he said.

Lily nodded and began to explain the procedures that needed to be followed before igniting the shuttle's boosters. This would be the last lesson she ever taught John, though she sensed he paid as little attention this time as he had in the past. At least he had a reason to be preoccupied.

"Wow, I didn't realize fuel was *this* low," she said, pointing to one of many gauges on the large control panel. "We're going to be cutting this close."

Once the systems checks were completed, she proceeded to the startup procedures. She continued to tell John what she was doing but the few times she glanced at him, Lily saw him staring through the window at Earth.

"We're over the Pacific now," he said. "We need to hurry up or we'll miss our opportunity."

"Copy that, systems and startups are clear," she informed him. "Radio the control room and let them know we're ready to unlatch from the station."

"Shuttle to station, we are a go. Disengage the docking latch," John said.

The radio was silent for several seconds and Lily worried Mansfield might be toying with them the same way he'd done with the Russian's shuttle. But they heard a *hissing* sound soon enough and felt a light churning sensation in their stomachs as they were released from the space station.

"Docking latch disengaged," President Marshall said. "Good luck and be safe."

The next few minutes passed in a blur for John, who did not feel an ounce of worry or concern about the second shuttle flight of his life. In fact, his mind thought about the first trip he ever took in a

spacecraft, the last shuttle off Earth before Comet Clement struck. It was also the first time he met Emily, a day that changed his life forever. He only wished she were sitting next to him right now. He didn't feel a sinking sensation in his stomach until he thought about where Emily might be at this moment, if she was still even alive...

"Okay, we've drifted far enough from the station," Lily said, again disrupting his daydreaming.

They both saw the Earth grow significantly larger through the cockpit's window during the few minutes since they detached from the station and drifted away. The shuttle was currently over the Pacific Ocean and quickly approaching the western coastline of America. Even without the aid of a telescope, Lily and John could tell that the coast was different than before the comet. Water covered the entire area of land where California once was, not to mention that Oregon and Washington were equally non-existent. But America's new geographical dimensions weren't something Lily had time to focus on, especially considering what she was about to do.

"It's time for booster ignition," she said. "Contact the space station and let them know we're about to make our final approach toward the atmosphere."

John did as he was told and once the president copied their transmission, Lily pushed the button that fired the shuttle's boosters. As the boosters ignited and the shuttle shot forward, John was thrown back in his seat and could do nothing but watch as Lily fought the control stick, trying to keep them properly aimed toward their destination. John knew he was minutes from being back on the Earth's surface, though the way the flight was going, he didn't know if the shuttle would be in *one* piece or *thousands* of little pieces by the time they touched down. As they passed through the Earth's uppermost atmosphere, John's seat shook harder as Lily struggled more and more to keep them steady.

"Come on, Lily, you can do this," he said, fighting the G-forces to push the words from his throat. "You do everything you've ever put your mind to."

Lily did not respond but John saw a noticeable difference in the

way she battled the control stick, a greater determination to keep the shuttle on course. Outside the shuttle's window, a bright orange glow appeared as they raced toward Earth's surface, the weight of gravity bearing down on both of them. Lily's arms suddenly felt like lead now that they lost weightlessness and perspiration poured down her face from the exertion of holding up her arms.

"I think we're going to make it," Lily called out over the sound of the shuttle's boosters and rushing air. "We're still on course for Western Texas, where *Destinee* was headed."

If every muscle in his body hadn't felt like it was being held down by a hundred-pound weight, John might've smiled at this good news. But he couldn't believe how hard it was to move, how much effect gravity had on his entire body. Despite everything going on around him, John's mind naturally returned to Emily and the difficulty she must've had returning to gravity.

If she had the chance to get used to gravity, he thought.

An ear-splitting *beeping* exploded in the cockpit and John found the strength to lean forward in his seat to find the source of the problem, a large red light blinking on the control panel. Lily seemed to know what was happening without needing to look.

"We're almost out of fuel," she yelled. "I don't know if we'll have enough to get to Texas."

Through the window, John saw the American landscape zooming by thousands of feet below them, though he had no idea how far beyond the coastline they traveled. But he didn't even need to look at the altimeter to know the shuttle was quickly losing altitude, clearly causing Lily to struggle to keep control of the shuttle as it plunged out of the sky. For the first time since leaving the space station, John actually worried they might not make it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Colin awoke just before dawn for the second day in a row. He could not fall back asleep without the night sky totally black. He felt more tired today since he'd gone to sleep much later the night before, having stayed awake with Ben for many hours after the stranger abruptly left. On top of that, more rainy weather passed through this area during the night; every inch of his body still remained cold and damp. Careful not to wake Heather – who somehow had the ability to sleep through anything – Colin stood and climbed the hill to the highway, where he found Ben standing in the middle of the road, looking into the distance behind him.

“Is this how I’m going to find you *every* morning?” Colin asked his friend.

“Don’t worry, I slept a couple hours last night,” Ben said before Colin had the chance to chide him. “The rain didn’t make it easy to sleep for long, though.”

“Plus I’m sure the drifter has been on your mind,” Colin said.

Colin was equally concerned with the sudden departure of the stranger the night before, especially after the odd man called him John, a detail Colin hadn’t shared with his overly-burdened friend. He also didn’t mention the other questions the stranger had about the seacraft and Ainsworth, as he knew Ben would only fret over extra details.

“I don’t understand why he’d show up, ask so many questions about us and take off without warning,” Ben said. “Not unless he was coming here to scout us for a larger group.”

Colin slowly shook his head.

“His leaving so suddenly was weird,” he said. “But the man didn’t strike me as an evil person. Besides, I doubt he would’ve told us about the sanctuary in New Mexico if he meant us harm. If he was trying to set us up, do you think he would’ve shared so much information about his own plight? About how he’d gotten here?”

“We don’t know if he was telling the truth. That whole story could’ve been made up,” Ben said suspiciously.

“I don’t think so,” Colin said. “Or why else would he have warned us about staying out of major cities? It sounds like his experience in Memphis was how things could’ve gone for us had we entered Phoenix, though we might not have been lucky enough to escape.”

Ben shrugged, a sign that he disagreed but no longer wished to discuss the matter. Though Ben continued to watch behind them for any sign of the stranger and his possible band of invaders, Colin stared at the road in front, barely able to see a few hundred yards ahead. But he spotted something in the distance that gave him a reason to be positive – and possibly gave him a reason to trust what the stranger told them.

“You see that car just down the road?” he asked Ben.

“Where?” his friend asked in a panic, quickly spinning around.

“Not one driving toward us,” Colin said. “I mean that wrecked one just ahead.”

Ben squinted to see in early morning darkness until he saw what his friend was talking about.

“You mean that hunk of junk on the side of the road?” Ben asked. “Is it turned over on its side?”

“Looks like it,” Colin said. “Maybe we should check it out. You heard what the drifter said about checking cars for keys.”

“Or maybe he wants us to blow ourselves up by trying to start damaged cars,” Ben said, though it was clear he didn’t really think that.

“I need to stretch my legs a bit.”

Colin wasn’t going to waste any more time trying to convince his friend so he started to walk forward, starting at a quick pace to build up some body warmth on this dreary morning. Behind him, he heard Ben’s sigh.

“Like we’re not going to do enough walking today,” Ben muttered, though he hurried to catch up.

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll get lucky and be able to *drive* today,” Colin said, though he was just as pessimistic as Ben about those chances.

Ben snorted and the two walked ahead in silence, though Ben peered over his shoulder numerous time to make sure the stranger didn't choose that moment to reappear. Reaching the car took longer than Colin expected but when they got to it, the two were surprised it was in better condition than they figured, regardless that it was turned on its side.

"Can you see inside the window if the keys are in the ignition?" Ben asked.

Neither wanted to get too close in case the car tipped over but Colin thought he caught the glint of metal near the steering wheel.

"I think they *are*," he said, somewhat surprised.

"Now what do we do then?"

"Only one thing *to* do," Colin said. "We tip it over and get inside to see if this thing will start."

"And you think tipping it over will be good for the car?" Ben asked.

"Does it matter either way?"

Ben shrugged and took his place near the back. The two agreed that safety was key and they'd bail out if they thought this was too dangerous. They counted to three and Ben pushed on the trunk while Colin did so on the car's hood. Surprisingly, they had little trouble tipping it over. Both quickly backed up when it smashed down on all four tires, loudly popping one of them in the process. Once the dust settled, Colin slowly approached the driver's door.

"Are you sure this thing isn't going to blow up?" Ben asked.

"Don't you think it would've exploded if it was going to?" Colin asked, opening the unlocked door and sliding into the seat. This was the first time he'd been in a car since his frantic drive along the West Coast before the comet strike. As he thought, the key was in the ignition and his heart raced as he took hold of it. "The moment of truth."

When Colin turned the key, nothing happened. He tried again to similarly failed results and avoided making eye contact with Ben, who was probably grinning with satisfaction. Instead, Colin found a tiny lever beneath the dashboard and pulled it, hearing the *click* of the

hood popping open.

“What are you doing?” Ben asked.

“I’m not really sure,” Colin answered truthfully.

He poked around inside the hood for a few minutes and tried to recall hours he spent inside a garage, watching impatiently as cars were being worked on. Colin wasn’t sure exactly what to look for but there was a small hose that had come detached near the back of the engine and he carefully screwed it back in place. That was the only thing he could possibly imagine so he lowered the hood and walked back toward the driver’s seat, knowing he was down to his final chance. But when he turned the key this time, he was surprised to hear the engine trying to turn over, eventually sputtering to life. He tapped the gas pedal a few times until the engine *purred* like it was brand new. A quick check of the gas gauge showed the tank nearly full.

“How did you do that?” Ben asked in amazement.

“My friend, John, he was big into cars when we were growing up,” Colin said. “He used to try explaining stuff to me when he worked on them, I guess something actually sunk in. Want to go for a ride?”

For the first time since Colin could remember, he saw a smile on Ben’s face, one not put there by the suffering of Tyler Ainsworth. Ben jogged climbed into the passenger seat and the two headed off down the highway, cruising at a speed well below the former speed limit because of a combination of a flat tire, debris scattered about and the poor condition of the highway, which had many cracks and divots.

“We shouldn’t go too far,” Ben said sadly after a few minutes. “We don’t want everyone thinking we abandoned them.”

Already the sun was starting to break the horizon and Colin knew it wouldn’t be long before the others started to wake. Still, he drove another mile down the road when they spotted a cluster of cars on the side of the highway.

“Let’s see if we can bring back *two* gifts,” Colin said hopefully.

Usually, Ben would’ve doubted those chances but the day

already turned out pretty good so far so he kept his negativity to himself. He got out of Colin's car and jogged around to each of the four abandoned cars, finally finding one with keys on his last attempt. To his delight, this car started and still had nearly half a tank of gas.

"I'll race you back," Ben said as he pulled up next to his friend.

"That's not fair, you have four tires that work," Colin laughed.

Ben shrugged before slamming on the gas, peeling wheels while darting ahead. Colin lost him after several minutes and by the time he reached the section of highway where the survivors were sleeping, he found a large crowd forming around Ben's car. Not surprisingly, there was a good deal of excitement about the automobiles, though they were only about a hundred cars short of having enough for everyone. When Colin came to a stop and got out, a rush of people crowded around his damaged car as well, examining it as though they'd never seen such a machine before.

"Don't worry, if Colin and I found these two in the matter of twenty minutes, hopefully there are plenty more out there, just as the drifter told us," Ben said, sounding strangely hopeful for once.

"Maybe someone should take those cars and drive ahead to Lehigh," Roy Hopkins suggested. "There's no point wasting all this time trying to get to a place that might not exist."

There were a few nods among Roy's group but the thought of Lehigh no longer existing brought grim expressions from the majority of the group.

"Nobody should take the risk of separating that far from the group and losing the rest of us forever," Ben said. "Besides, *whatever* we find in Lehigh – whether it's still standing or completely wiped from the face of the Earth – we should all find it together. However, I do like the idea of using these cars to our advantage. I think one car should stay about a mile behind our group – obviously, the more damaged car would be perfect for that – while the other should go a mile or two ahead. For now – at least until we find cars for all of us – these two can be used as scout vehicles so we always know if someone is approaching us from in front or behind."

Plenty of seacraft survivors raised their hands to volunteer for

such a driving mission but Ben ultimately selected Colin and Heather to take the lead car, along with two of Roy's people, which he hoped would keep that group happy. Four others were chosen for the rear car but then it was back to business as usual.

"Okay, the rest of us will continue walking," Ben announced to the groaning of nearly four hundred people. "Don't worry, the lead car will check any automobiles they find and bring back those in working condition. Hopefully, more of us will be driving by the end of the day. Now let's move out."

As Colin, Heather and their two passengers climbed into the lead car, Colin suddenly froze when he thought he heard a familiar sound in the distance.

"What's wrong?" Heather asked when Colin didn't get behind the wheel.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

"Hear what?"

At first, Colin thought his mind was playing tricks on him as he no longer heard the sound over the talking crowd, still abuzz about the cars. But then he thought he heard it again and could no longer stand there without saying something.

"I need everyone to be quiet!" Colin called out, though only those nearest listened to him. "Everyone SHUT UP!"

That got the crowd's attention and Ben immediately rushed over.

"What's wrong? Do you see something coming?" he asked, looking into the distance.

"Everyone listen!" Colin called out to the group before speaking quieter to his friend. "Can you hear that?"

With the crowd silent, a pin drop could've been heard in the early morning, let alone the familiar high-pitched *whining* that grew louder by the second. Almost as one, everyone in the crowd craned their necks toward the sky and looked for the source of the noise, the same one they heard after landing on shore a few days earlier.

"Do you really think there's *another* one?" Ben whispered.

"That's sure what it sounds like," Colin answered.

“What could it possibly be?”

“Maybe we’ll find out soon enough,” Colin said.

After half a minute, the noise became so loud that Ben and Colin wouldn’t have heard each other if they kept talking. Someone suddenly pointed toward the western sky and they saw a long trail of smoke streaking toward them. Within seconds, the speeding aircraft soared overhead but this one appeared lower in the sky than the one from a few days earlier. Though the crowd only had a view of it for a few seconds, it was clear this craft was no airplane any of them had seen before.

“What was that?” Colin asked. “It looked like something out of a sci-fi movie. We should’ve asked the drifter if he knew about these aircraft.”

“Whatever it was, it looked like it was coming down fast,” Ben said. “If we keep moving forward, maybe we’ll eventually find out.”

With that, Colin got into the better of the two cars and drove ahead, keeping one eye out for potential danger and another for the aircraft.

The stranger continued to stare at the white streak of smoke in the sky but he made sure not to lose his balance this time. It had been nearly ten minutes since another mysterious aircraft soared above and the stranger continued to look for any clues about what it was or where it came from. Unfortunately, he saw nothing but a long line of fading smoke. He finally looked away when Real growled.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he told the dog. “We should keep moving.”

The stranger continued walking down the highway, Real limping a few feet in front of him. His car ran out of gas hours ago, ten miles after he left the crowd of seacraft survivors. He was hoping to find another automobile so he could reach his destiny sooner but as the survivors told him, there weren’t many cars along the road. His heart pounded with excitement every time he walked up a hilly section of highway though he felt equally disappointed each time he

saw the road ahead devoid of life.

“Don’t worry, girl, we have to be getting closer,” he told Real, though he was trying more to convince himself.

After another twenty minutes of walking, the man spotted something a few hundred yards off the side of the highway. From that far away, it look little different from the rest of the debris he’d seen along his long journey. But the man’s eyes continued to be attracted to the object’s color – a dark green that made him think of only one thing – and he kept looking. He eventually stopped on the side of the road and stared into the distance, not before he whistled for his dog to stop. Real hobbled back to him and sat down, stared up at him with big brown eyes.

“I know it might just be trash but it *could* be so much more,” he said, “especially considering what’s next to it. I know we’re getting close to our goal but this might be crucial to accomplishing it. Now come on, make sure you stay close. It could be dangerous out there.”

Not far from the debris was a large crack in the ground, which looked much bigger as the man approached. Although such fissures weren’t unusual after so many deadly earthquakes rocked the earth, the man couldn’t help being amazed by these huge sections of damaged land whenever he saw them. Even when he was fifty yards from the fissure, the man walked slowly and carefully, ready to turn and run at the first sign of collapsing land. He approached the debris and smiled when he read the side of the green crate: U.S. ARMY/FORT HUACHUCA. The man didn’t remember seeing any sort of military installation though he’d done a lot of traveling in the dark and there was no reason to believe an Army base could’ve survived when nothing else had.

Real sat a safe distance from the crate and whined when his master approached it.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be careful,” he said.

He carefully lifted the lid and smiled when he saw what was inside.

“It’s perfect,” he told the dog before carefully securing the lid on top. “Now you stay here, I need to check the crevice.”

Real barked but remained still.

“I know, I know, but if that tree didn’t cause a collapse, I doubt my weight will,” the stranger said.

He slowly approached the crevice, walking past a tree only ten feet from the edge. He checked a few of cracks before and found they greatly differed in size and depth. But while many were relatively small and only a few feet deep – barely more than a dent in the ground – this one was massive, so deep he couldn’t even see the bottom. The man instantly backed away before inching forward again, marveling at the vastness below. He picked up a small rock and tossed it over the side. He saw it disappear, but not before hearing it crash into something not too far below. He stuck his head over the edge and saw a ledge – about five feet long and three feet wide – sticking out of the fissure wall twenty feet below. The wall sloped slightly inward and he almost missed seeing it but he was glad he hadn’t; a plan quickly formed in his mind.

“I told you this would be worth it,” he told Real when he returned to grab his backpack. He rifled through his few belongings until he found what he needed: a length of rope approximately twenty feet long. He used the rope as a makeshift leash on the rare occasions he couldn’t afford to have Real wander too far from him. Upon seeing his leash, Real approached and sat in front of his master, gaining an appreciative pat on the head for his obedience. “This isn’t for you this time, girl.”

Instead, the man carefully wrapped the rope around the crate, securing it as best he could. Real looked at him questioningly but the man only smiled in return.

“Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing,” he told her. “Hopefully this works and you’ll understand my reasoning. Now I need you to stay still a few more minutes.”

Real lay down and watched the man drag the crate toward the edge of the fissure. He carefully lowered it to the ledge, coming to the end of the rope a few feet before the crate touched down. He struggled to hold it up and felt his body slowly being pulled toward the edge. He let go and heard the crate hit. Nervous that he’d blown

the whole thing, he scrambled over and peered down at the ledge, relieved to find the crate survived and hadn't fallen into the abyss. Breathing a sigh of relief, he returned to Real after making a quick stop to dig through the rest of debris.

"This should do the trick," he said, pulling a severely damaged and dented red mailbox from the junk pile. "Come on, girl, we still have plenty of walking."

Real wagged his tail and headed toward the highway. The man placed the red mailbox a few feet to the side of the road before he continued walking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Wet...

Cold...

Darkness...

Pain...

AJ Brighton struggled to open his eyes but doing so solved only one problem and he quickly learned that having light made his pain worse. At first, he felt oddly removed from the situation until the sound of raging rapids slowly faded in and brought him back to full consciousness. When he tried to take a deep breath, he got a mouthful of water and realized the thousands of sparkles in front of his eyes were caused by the sun's reflection off rippling water. Despite intense pain in his head – as well as the rest of his body – AJ felt comfortable, though he soon figured out why: his head rested on a mound of silt, his body floating in a few inches of water feet from the swiftly-moving water.

Confusion racked his brain for several minutes. He didn't know where he was and why he hurt so much, why pain seemed to attack every inch of his body. He knew that standing – or sitting for that matter – might help him figure out what was happening. But he wasn't ready to deal with the added pain of movement and wondered if closing his eyes and succumbing to unconsciousness might be best.

If only I had my sleeping roll and could get to dry land, AJ thought, knowing the cold water made him as uncomfortable as the pain. He slowly moved his arm toward his back but the pack was nowhere to be found, a discovery that jarred a wave of memories in his pained brain. The river... the wolves... running and jumping... the bloodthirsty animal ripping my pack apart... my parents rescuing me... the rocks in the river... somebody floating face down...

The last painful memory was enough to get him moving. When he finally sat up, a wave of nausea swept over him and AJ became ill, throwing up in the water surrounding him. Heaving only increased his pain but he couldn't help it, nor could he stop it. He tried to rush away from vomit floating around him but trying to move quickly was

the worst thing he could do. AJ suddenly felt all blood rush to his head. He was so dizzy that he stumbled *forward* into the water instead of *away*, barely controlling himself before he reached the rapids. Careful not to get swept away, he turned in the knee-high water and stumbled back toward land, collapsing onto the muddy riverbank where he forced himself to take deep breaths. The water felt colder now than before and based upon the sun's position in the sky, he knew he'd been unconscious for hours.

The riverbank was steep, and his first few feeble attempts to climb proved unsuccessful. AJ slipped down the muddy bank and splashed back into the water. It wasn't until he focused on the task and ignored the pain that AJ maintained his footing long enough to reach the top, using every remaining ounce of energy to pull himself over the edge and onto dry land. As he lay on the ground and heaved deep breaths, the pain became so overwhelming that blackness began to creep into the corners of his eyes. When he tried to stand, the pain in his body and severe thirst made his arms and legs feel like wet noodles.

Again, AJ was on the verge of passing out but the thought of one of his parents facedown in the river motivated him to stay awake, motivated him to force his limbs into moving. There was no doubt in his mind that his mom and dad were in serious trouble; they would've returned to find him by now if they were safe. He struggled to his feet and looked at his surroundings, desperately trying to fight through pain to figure out which direction to go. It took him several minutes to deduce that he crossed the river – or more like been dragged across the river – and needed to continue downstream.

AJ plodded forward unsteadily, legs like rubber-bands for the first few minutes he walked. He at least had the sense to move a safe distance from the riverbank in case he lost his balance and tumbled back over the edge. It was a miracle he survived a trip down the river the first time; he knew a second trip would lead to his demise. Thankfully, he found the strength to steady himself on his feet despite the pain in his head growing worse. At one point, he made the mistake of touching the huge lump on the side of his head where he

smashed against the rock. His hair was still caked with dried blood and touching the wound sent a burst of pain through him that sapped strength from his body and nearly caused him to collapse. From that moment, he ignored his injury and focused on walking.

Not much entered AJ's mind as he limped along the riverbank; movement was almost like second nature to him. He was angry that the wolf attack caused him to lose his backpack but he didn't worry about the threat of another such attack, which would surely be the end of him in such a weakened state. Besides the thought of pain, the only other thing on his mind was finding his parents; he prayed that they were safe. AJ blamed himself for putting them in danger since they never would've stayed in Russia had it not been for him. The idea that he could've been the cause of their harm brought him nearly as much agony as the river rocks had.

After a while, AJ had trouble focusing on anything beyond placing one foot in front of another, constantly struggling forward though he eventually forgot where he was going or why he was going there. He had no perception of time and though he occasionally scanned the horizon, he rarely looked up because the sun made his head feel worse. Luckily, the sun was setting but a severe drop in temperature caused him to become so cold that he shivered uncontrollably, making pain in his body that much worse. AJ tried to ignore it, though his mind morphed into a blank slate and his movements and general appearance became zombie-like. The simple act of walking required great concentration as every step became more difficult, more strenuous on a body that cried for rest. AJ stumbled to the ground but his subconscious forced him to stand and keep moving, though he only managed a few more steps until he fell once more. He tried standing but the air around him turned so cold that uncontrollable shivering made balancing impossible; he ended up taking ten steps in the wrong direction before going down for good. The tiny voice in the back of his head telling him to get up and keep moving was finally silenced; his mind went so numb that he no longer remembered Irena or the wolf attack or his parents or even the pain...

Despite his shivering, AJ closed his eyes and his world went

black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Space station, do you copy?” John yelled into the radio, shouting over the sound of the emergency fuel alarm.

He listened for several seconds but received no response, at least none that he could hear.

“I told you we wouldn’t be able to contact them,” John told Lily, who surprised him minutes earlier by demanding he try to contact the station. With the shuttle losing altitude too quickly – not to mention that she still struggled to keep them on course – Lily should’ve concentrated more on the shuttle than the space station as far as John was concerned.

“But now we *know Destinee* could’ve survived,” Lily said. “We can’t contact the station and *we’re* still in one piece.”

“Maybe you should focus on keeping us that way,” John said.

John might’ve felt a sliver of relief had their shuttle not been in such dire circumstances. Luckily, Lily wrestled control of the shuttle and their altitude eventually evened out, though they still flew lower than expected. Lily felt comfortable enough to let go of the control stick with one hand, which she used to push a button on the control panel. The flashing red light and blaring alarm turned off and the cockpit sounded strangely silent despite the sound of rushing wind outside the shuttle.

“What did you do?” John asked.

“I cut the engines so we don’t use more fuel,” Lily said. “We barely have any left, maybe another couple minutes of burn time.”

“So why aren’t you using the rest of it?” he asked. “We still need enough thrust to reach the landing zone.”

“We *need* to use the reverse boosters to slow us when we land,” Lily said. “Besides, we’re not far from the landing zone. We might not make it right on target but *Destinee* might not have either. Start searching the land for any sign of the other spacecraft.”

John already kept an eye on the land that flashed by them but there was little to see since they moved so fast and were so high in the sky. Now that they were slowing and getting lower, the landscape still

appeared bare in most places. At one point, he thought he spotted a group of people on a road but they appeared no larger than ants and could've been anything, such as debris scattered about almost everywhere else. Conditions on the surface might have seemed demolished in many areas but when the shuttle traveled farther from the coast, he saw several intact houses and buildings, including a few surrounded by a large wall. Unfortunately, he didn't see other evidence of humans, though there were so many cracks in the ground that he wondered if everyone was simply swallowed alive.

It wasn't long until the shuttle dipped so low in the sky that finding a landing zone became an imminent requirement.

"There," Lily said, pointing to a long stretch of flat, barren land. "I don't think we'll have enough time to stay airborne and find a better spot."

John agreed that this area looked flat and empty enough but there was one thing about it that made him nervous.

"Don't you see that crack in the ground?" he asked, pointing into the distance. "You may as well try to land us beside the Grand Canyon."

Indeed, this was one of the largest sections of damaged land they spotted yet, as the fissure stretched for miles. But Lily already began to bank the descending shuttle on a path leading to this area.

"We'll have to make sure we stop before we get that far," she said.

"Moving this fast?" John asked, though arguing was worthless now since there was no turning back.

"I can take care of that," Lily said, reaching her hand forward. "Hold on, I'm going to fire reverse thrusters."

With the push of a button, John was thrown forward in his seat; had he not been strapped in, he might have smashed through the window. The reverse thrusters were the shuttle's only braking system but they only fired a few seconds before they continued to hurtle forward at a breakneck speed, which seemed even faster the closer they got to touching down. John still thought it felt like they were moving too fast and a single glance at Lily – who looked confused as

she pushed the same button over and over to no avail – let him know something wasn't right.

“What is it? Shouldn't we be slowing down?” he asked.

“It's the reverse boosters,” she said. “They were supposed to fire longer than that and now they aren't working at all.”

“Is it because we're out of fuel?”

“No, I made sure to save enough. There's something wrong with the thrusters, they aren't getting any juice.”

John had been with Lily during countless dangerous situations over the years but this was the first time he could ever describe her voice as sounding frightened – even panicked.

“What are we going to do?” John asked.

But the answer was so obvious that Lily didn't bother to respond: there was nothing they *could* do. The final approach was the longest minute of John's life, though he did nothing but sit and watch in shock. Surprisingly, he did not think of Emily nor did he recall important moments from his life. It was almost as if he was detached from the situation, watching the tense climax of a movie from the safety of his home. Not until the shuttle's wheels touched down was John shaken out of his shocked trance. Instead of rolling to a smooth stop, the shuttle skipped off the ground like a stone tossed across a smooth pond. Lily struggled to guide the shuttle down again but when she did, they skipped across the desert surface a second time, shooting them back into the air.

John knew that they'd eventually have to slow but looking through the window, he saw they were quickly running out of space.

“The crack is coming up,” he yelled. “The crack is coming up!”

“I see it!”

Lily was less gentle with the control stick now and when they touched down a third time, there was much more jarring. John knew the wheels had to take serious damage but the shuttle visibly slowed; when it skipped again, they didn't get as much air. They smashed down again but the wheels stuck this time and their ride became much bumpier. Unfortunately, the shuttle wasn't slowing soon enough and the crack loomed larger in front of them.

“We don’t have enough time to stop!” John yelled. “You have to turn us.”

“We’re going too quick for that, I’d flip the shuttle. We still have room,” Lily said.

But after several seconds, it became clear that they *didn’t* have enough room.

“You’re right, we need to do something,” Lily said, her voice strangely calm though they were seconds from plunging over the edge. “I hope this works.”

John watched in horror as she kept the stick aimed straight ahead and moved her hand toward the control panel. He could think of no other explanation except that Lily lost her mind in the face of death.

“You said the reverse thrusters weren’t working,” he cried.

“They aren’t,” she confirmed. “But I never said anything about the boosters.”

“The boosters?”

There was a gently sloping hill before the edge of the fissure and Lily waited until they reached this hill to push the button. The explosion of the booster’s ignition threw John back against his seat, the force nearly stopping him from watching the shuttle soar over the massive crack in the ground. With such a limited supply of fuel, the burn lasted only a few seconds; John knew they’d be cutting it close to the other side. For the second time in minutes, he could do nothing more than watch his fate play out before his eyes.

The shuttle touched down mere feet on the other side of the cavernous crack, jostling so viciously that John felt whiplash. This land was nowhere near as flat as the other side and John’s body felt like a rag doll tossed around in his seat during the long bumpy ride. Through the violent jostling of the ride, it was hard to focus on anything but pain though John soon realized the shuttle was at least slowing, that they were at least going to land safely. But he caught sight of something through the window that could change all of that.

“There’s...another...crack,” he said, his voice choppy, words difficult to spit out as he was being thrown about.

It was even harder to turn his head but when he did, he saw Lily still gamely holding onto the shuttle's control stick, keeping them steady despite the rough ride. As always, he was amazed by her toughness and ability to perform under the most strenuous conditions. After all, Lily was much smaller than him, yet she fought the jostling and kept herself – and therefore the shuttle – controlled enough to survive.

“I...see...it,” she yelled back.

This time, Lily was not about to aim for danger. She jerked the stick to the left but the shuttle barely turned, nowhere near enough to avoid the second crack, which did not appear as large as the last one. John saw that this new fissure looked as long as the last but from their vantage point, he could not tell how wide or deep. But considering how the shuttle was not turning or slowing enough to avoid it, John knew he would find out soon enough.

“It...won't...turn,” Lily yelled. “Hold...on.”

There was no hill before the edge of this crack and no more fuel to ignite the boosters and propel them to safety. When they went over the edge, John expected nothing but a deep black pit and imminent death. But this crack was far more superficial than the last one – no more than a few feet deep and wide – and most of the shuttle skipped over it. Unfortunately, the back wheels clipped the edge just enough so they landed slightly skewed to the left. Lily fought to straighten them out but only had a few seconds to try before gravity took over and she lost total control.

The shuttle tilted to one side and began to flip. John's world was turned upside down as they rolled across the land. If he thought the ride was bumpy earlier, there was no comparison to this. After the first few flips, John lost count and fought to stay conscious; darkness crept across his vision. His insides felt out of place; he was on the verge of being sick. At that point, he considered blacking out the better of the two options but the shuttle eventually stopped before either happened. With the shuttle on its side, John felt the added weight of gravity as the safety straps dug into his body, keeping him from falling out of his seat. At first, he worried he might've become

paralyzed during the crash because he could barely move. But he didn't feel severe pain anywhere on his body and when he concentrated on moving his limbs, he could do so with great effort. John realized he was simply weak from the Earth's gravity and wondered if the comet strike somehow made the gravity pull stronger than usual. He inevitably thought about Emily and wondered how she could've dealt with this type of strain on her body...

He struggled to turn his head toward the window and saw it severely cracked. Once the dust settled outside the shuttle, John looked at the desolate land and found no sign of life. Though he'd seen nothing during their flight to indicate a human population, a part of him was still disappointed not to see anyone rushing to the scene to help, especially *Destinee* survivors. *If there are any Destinee survivors*, he thought. He hoped Lily guided them close to the targeted landing zone but realized there were more immediate issues deal with before he could figure out how to find Emily.

The side of Lily's face was covered in blood and she hung limp in her seat, held in place only by the seat straps. At first glance, she appeared to be dead but before John had the chance to panic, he saw her cough and begin to stir.

"Are you okay?" he groaned.

She opened her eyes and wiped the blood away before turning toward the cockpit's control panel, where not a single button was lit.

"Did you try the radio?" she croaked.

"It didn't work the last time; it doesn't look like *anything* works anymore," John said. "Should we be more concerned with getting everyone out of here in case the shuttle explodes?"

"That can't happen, there's nothing flammable left. That's why I made sure to burn the remaining fuel," Lily said, proving again her ability to make wise decisions in the face of danger. "Now check the radio to make sure."

John struggled to move his arm and reach the radio but when he did, it was as dead as the rest of the shuttle's systems. In fact, the shuttle interior was so quiet that they could hear the moaning of other passengers in the back.

“We need to check on everyone next,” Lily said. “Can you get yourself free to help me down?”

Since the shuttle was rolled on its side, the floor was actually the wall closest to John, who carefully unbuckled his straps but fell out of his seat and crashed down anyway. When he tried to stand, it felt like an elephant was sitting on his back, trying to hold him down. By the time he was on his feet, he was sweating profusely from the exertion of a task once so routine. He was so fatigued that he leaned against the side of the wall and took several deep breaths.

“I’m going to release my straps now,” Lily said, barely giving him a few seconds to catch his breath. “You need to help ease me down.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good –”

But Lily didn’t give him a choice. She undid her safety harness before John could warn her and she plunged out of her seat, falling toward the floor like dead weight. Although John’s feet and arms felt like they had concrete blocks attached to them, he somehow found the energy to rush forward and stick out his arms to try to catch her. He couldn’t, however, muster the strength to pluck her out of the air; she crashed into him and sent them both sprawling to the floor. Lily rolled off of him and also found it difficult to pull herself up.

“Yeah, I probably should’ve waited a few minutes to do that,” Lily said.

“And I should’ve done more exercising aboard the space station,” John replied.

Although John hadn’t had much to smile about the last few days, this made the two crack up like they didn’t have a problem in the world. For a few brief moments, John felt tension melt away as he lay on the floor and laughed. But the constant moaning of other passengers brought a quick end to their good time.

“We better check on everyone,” Lily said.

The two struggled to climb toward the small hallway connected to the back of the shuttle, which housed dozens of other passengers. Based upon the groaning and cries of pain, John expected to find plenty of carnage in the back. A dim red emergency light provided the

only light in the passenger section but John could tell right away that the damage wasn't as bad as he feared. Plenty of people already unbuckled themselves and the strong few who powered through the gravity already helped free those hanging from the side of the craft that was up in the air.

"We actually made it?" someone asked John as he crawled by.

"Barely," John answered. "Believe me, you don't want to know how close we came to disaster."

With so many people helping each other, John figured it was best to find a way out of the shuttle. Hundreds of passengers were jammed into this section like sardines and he suddenly felt claustrophobic, a feeling he somehow avoided for years. But knowing that the wide-open Earth was just on the other side of the shuttle's hull made John anxious to get out, to finally step foot on solid ground. Besides, it was so hot and stuffy inside the shuttle that he needed to breathe fresh air for once. He crawled to the escape hatch and tried to push it open, which required a lot more energy than he had. After several failed attempts, he collapsed to the floor and heaved deep gulps of air.

"You need help with that?"

John looked up and saw the oldest passenger aboard the shuttle standing in front of him. He felt embarrassed that the older man somehow found the strength to stand so he hastily scrambled to his feet, though he wanted nothing more than to rest.

"You can give it a try, Professor, but the door seems stuck," John said. "It probably suffered serious damage during the rolling."

"I'll give it a shot. Here, hold these," Chris Fratanoro said, handing over his pack of books, which would've been heavy even if John were accustomed to the gravity. His arm was nearly ripped out of its socket and the weight of the books dragged him to the ground. "Be careful with those, they might be the last historical references on Earth."

"Sorry," John said, struggling to throw the pack onto his shoulder.

John didn't expect the former Ivy League professor to budge

the door and was confused about why Fratanoro ran his fingers along the edges of the door.

“What are you – ”

Before John could finish, the professor rammed his shoulder into the door and it *groaned* open. A rush of fresh air flooded the shuttle and for several seconds, John did nothing more than take deep breaths and enjoy air not artificially processed. The rest of the passengers quieted momentarily but that didn’t last long, as more people struggled to get out of their suspended seats.

“How did you do that?” John asked the professor, who took back his heavy supply of books.

“Like you said, the door was slightly dented so I had to find its weakest spot and exploit that weakness,” Fratanoro said before pushing it open even wider, allowing more daylight to enter. “And it looks like our rolling came to a stop at the perfect spot.”

With that, the professor jumped through the open doorway to John’s surprise. He rushed over and looked out to see the ground was only a few feet below the doorframe.

“It would’ve been much more difficult to get to the ground if we landed perfectly on the wheels,” the professor said. “I don’t suppose this thing comes with a ladder, does it?”

When John jumped down the few feet, he immediately crumpled under the strain of his own weight. But standing was much easier now than the first time and he already felt himself growing accustomed to gravity, at least a little bit. An examination of the shuttle’s exterior proved shocking; it didn’t look like anyone could’ve survived inside. Deep gouges ran along the length of the hull and the shuttle resembled an oversize aluminum can kicked around for miles, especially since both rear wings snapped off hundreds of feet behind them.

“Our pilot did an amazing job, didn’t she?” Fratanoro asked.

“She certainly did.”

“I don’t know if anyone else could’ve succeeded while landing in such conditions,” the professor said.

John immediately thought of *Destinee’s* pilot and prayed the

ISU's top flier had been able to accomplish what Lily did. He scanned the horizon for any sign of other spacecraft and while he wanted nothing more than to begin his search for Emily right away, he couldn't abandon helping the passengers inside the shuttle who made his early return to the Earth possible. John took one last glance at the land and climbed back through the shuttle door, where he started unbuckling and evacuating people.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“If we somehow run into them on the streets, that’s not my fault,” Tyler Ainsworth said. “You’re my witness; we waited nearly a day before walking. There was only one main road, they couldn’t have expected us not to follow it. Besides, there should be enough room around here for Ben *and* me. Phoenix is a big city, after all.”

Tyler and Earl saw the outline of the city for a few hours but only recently got close enough to see the lone surviving sign that welcomed them to Phoenix. The two debated whether Ben and the other seacraft survivors would have decided to stop here. Tyler refused to believe the group could’ve passed up the opportunity to enter city limits to potentially stock up on supplies. Earl wasn’t quite so sure the others would make such a lengthy detour from their long journey to Kansas but Tyler was convinced.

“I don’t care if we run into them anyway,” Ainsworth said defiantly, his bravery returning now that Coleman was nowhere to be seen. “I refuse to kneel down to that punk again. If he wants a fight, I’ll be more than willing to give him one. Unless they found some source of food and water, Coleman must be as weak as us anyway.”

“Yeah, he must be,” Earl agreed, only to stop Ainsworth from talking. Earl had been worried about Ainsworth and the way he remained silent the first few hours after they were double-crossed. But the man had since recovered from shock, which wasn’t especially something Earl was happy about. The Ainsworth-of-old seemed to have returned; gone was the humble man for whom Earl stayed behind. He just hoped Tyler’s mouth and brazen attitude didn’t eventually get *him* in trouble, too.

Although Ainsworth had every intention of entering the city limits, they traveled around the major roads with the intent of finding the perfect entry point. They eventually found a connecting road with an intact sign labeled I-17 North.

“If the group *did* decide to bypass the city, I’d guess they went this way and headed north toward Kansas,” Ackerman said.

“I told you, they’d be *idiots* to keep going,” Ainsworth said. “I

can't think of a reason why someone would give up a great opportunity like this."

Again, Earl did not have the energy to argue. But as he looked at the city mostly in ruins, he didn't understand why Ainsworth was so enthralled with this 'opportunity.' While Earl agreed with their need for finding food or water, he wasn't quite so sure that Phoenix – or any city for that reason – would be the answer to their problems. Though they hadn't yet come across other comet survivors, Earl was sure at least a handful of people lived and those people would've undoubtedly been drawn toward this big city in search of supplies, especially since the rest of the surrounding area was so barren. And if there *were* people living here under lawless conditions, Earl wasn't quite so sure Phoenix would be their savior...

"Hurry up, this is the perfect place to enter city limits," Tyler said, pointing out a spot that appeared to lead into a section of Phoenix more intact than the rest. They were now on the I-10 but that eventually led to an off-ramp.

Once off the highways and into the city, Tyler and Earl truly saw the level of devastation, even in the section that seemed more intact than other areas. The destroyed and fallen buildings – not to mention those few tipped over and leaned precariously against intact ones – were easy to spot from far away but much of the smaller-scale destruction gave Earl a better indication of the city's overall condition. More charred debris was strewn about in the first street they encountered than all the land they walked in two days. Torched cars and piles of concrete rubble littered the street, making it nearly impassable in certain spots. Large areas of grass and weeds busted through every part of the street and nearby sidewalks; the city looked like it was abandoned much longer than five years. Even those buildings still standing suffered serious damage, as very few glass windows were in one piece.

"Look at that," Ainsworth said, pointing up toward a particularly tall building just down the street. "Pretty amazing, huh?"

There was a sense of wonder and fascination in Tyler's voice that Earl couldn't quite understand, as if Ainsworth was like a little

kid in a morbid amusement park. When Earl looked toward the top of the nearby building, he expected to see the usual wreckage, twisted metal building frame and shattered glass windows. But on top of that normal damage *was* an amazing sight, though Earl wasn't quite as excited as Ainsworth.

"Is that a tractor trailer?" Ackerman asked in frightened awe, unable to look away from the building. "That's at least twenty stories up."

Half of a massive truck hung dangerously out the destroyed side of the building and looked like it would slip out and plunge hundreds of feet at any moment. The force needed to lift the big rig that high and jam it into the building was almost unfathomable and gave Earl another example of the extreme annihilation the comet caused.

"Maybe we should find another street to walk down," Earl said. "This one doesn't seem safe enough."

"Just because we have to pass beneath the truck? You worry too much. If the truck was going to fall, it would've done so already," Tyler said. "Besides, there's probably something dangerous on every street that we'll have to deal with."

"If that's the case, maybe we should rethink entering the city," Earl said. "Maybe we should keep following the highway instead."

"Don't be such a wimp," Tyler snapped. "Let's be real here, there hasn't been anything else out there and Phoenix is the only major city in this part of the country. If we don't find anything to eat or drink here, we're in some serious trouble."

Regardless of how they chose to proceed, Earl had a bad feeling they were in serious trouble anyway. He suddenly felt like they were being watched though he saw nobody peering out at them from nearby buildings. Earl turned back toward the off-ramp and the highways beyond the city and thought he saw a person watching from far away.

"Do you see that?" he asked Tyler.

Ainsworth spun around and looked toward the roads but saw nothing; the person Earl thought he spotted was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you trying to mess with me?” Tyler asked angrily. “First you act like you want to leave the city, then you pretend someone is following us. Make up your mind already.”

“No, I could’ve sworn someone was there looking at us,” Ackerman answered, as he continued to scan the roads to no avail.

“We don’t have time for games,” Tyler said. “I don’t care what *you* do but I’m going this way.”

Despite Earl’s unwavering loyalty and refusal to leave him behind, Ainsworth reassumed his power role now that the two were in an equally bad position. Earl had grown used to receiving instructions from Ainsworth over the years – even if he didn’t agree with him all the time – and it felt better seeing the man regain some of his former authority. Earl just hoped Tyler made decisions for the better, as he rushed to catch up with him.

“See, I told you this wouldn’t be so bad,” Ainsworth said as they made it halfway down the street, their feet *crunching* through fields of broken glass along the way, both walking around and over piles of debris.

Earl no longer felt eyes watching his every movement but there was still something strange about being inside the city, still something in the back of his mind warning him not to be there. The silence was eerie as they continued walking but became even more frightening when Earl suddenly heard a *rustling* nearby. Tyler stopped in his tracks as quickly as Earl but waited for the smaller man to voice his concern first.

“Did you hear that?” Earl asked, quickly glancing around.

He immediately looked up at the dangling tractor-trailer though it was still farther down the street and the noise was clearly coming from ground level. When a nearby pile of rubble moved and a rat scurried across the street, Earl relaxed a bit though he was still on edge. Tyler, however, acted like he hadn’t been scared at all.

“You’re pathetic,” Ainsworth laughed. “You’re going to let a little damage and a rat make you flee?”

Tyler shook his head in disgust and continued to walk, leaving Earl to question for the hundredth time his decision about parting

from the rest of the survivors. But when he looked behind again and found the highways totally deserted, he knew his only chance to leave Ainsworth might be long gone, that finding Ben's group within the city might be his only chance to correct his mistake.

He still didn't think survivors had come here, though, which left Ainsworth his only option. Earl hurried to catch up and then rushed again when they reached the end of the block, where the shadow of the tractor-trailer covered the entire street. Even Tyler walked a little quicker than usual but he'd never admit feeling the same worry as Earl. The two continued in silence for nearly ten city blocks until Ainsworth spotted a building he liked in the distance.

"Do you see that white boxy one?" he asked. "That's where we're going."

Most buildings still intact were of the shorter variety – ten to fifteen stories at most – as the large majority of skyscrapers either collapsed or toppled dangerously against other buildings. A particularly impressive building with blue-tinted windows – at least those windows still in place – tilted unnaturally to one side and looked about to fall at any moment. Of course Tyler chose a path directly beneath this building, more frightening to pass under than even the tractor-trailer. The only solace Earl took was that if the building fell, it would kill *both* of them. For some reason, Ackerman always had the feeling that when Tyler finally got them both in *serious* trouble – as if being forced to separate from the other seacraft survivors wasn't serious enough – that *he* would be the one to pay a serious price, not Ainsworth.

Although they hadn't lost sight of the white boxy building during their walk, it took longer to reach than the two expected. They encountered time-consuming obstacles on every street, which meant nearly three hours passed until they finally reached their destination. While every other intact building appeared worse up close, this boxy building was unlike the others. With the exception of a few broken windows, it was amazingly unscathed, somehow avoiding the same destruction as every other building in the whole of Phoenix.

"It looks like somebody picked it up before the comet struck

and put it back in place after the devastation passed,” Earl said.

“Do you *still* think we should’ve left the city?” Ainsworth asked sarcastically as they stared in awe at the building.

“Yes, I do,” Earl said with defiance. In fact, he felt even more nervous outside about this building than the destroyed ones because these windows were intact and he couldn’t see inside. “I think we should turn back now and get back to the highways. I don’t even think we should go inside.”

“Are you insane?” Ainsworth asked. “If the interior is anywhere near as nice as out here, we might never have to worry about shelter again. All we’ll have to do is scavenge food from around the city and we can live here like kings.”

“I think that idea might be too good to be true,” Earl said.

“Paranoid, I shouldn’t be surprised,” Tyler said dismissively. “I don’t know why I listen to your crazy blabbering sometimes. Now are you coming inside with me or not?”

Earl did not answer and continued to look from window to window; the sensation of being watched returned. Tyler finally sighed in annoyance and headed toward the front doors. For the moment Earl stood outside alone, his paranoia actually increased and he realized that despite his ever-growing hatred for Ainsworth, he hated being alone even more. He quickly abandoned his search of the windows and ran inside.

Upon entering the building, Earl found Tyler standing still, just looking into the darkness of the lobby.

“Is something wrong?” Ackerman asked.

He hoped Ainsworth would admit reservations about proceeding forward, especially since the interior of the apartment building was so dimly lit. But Earl should’ve known that was expecting too much, as Tyler continued into the large lobby.

“Something *wrong*?” Tyler asked incredulously. “You must be joking. Look at this place, it’s damn near perfect.”

Although little light filtered into the lobby, the parts they could see were just as pristine as the building’s exterior. Only a thin layer of dust made the place seem like it was part of the new, broken world.

“Now all we have to do is find the stairs and start picking which apartments we want to live in,” Ainsworth said.

“Not in my territory you won’t.”

The voice was low and gruff and came from somewhere in the shadows ahead. Earl wanted to turn and run but his feet seemed frozen in place – much like Tyler’s – and the chills that ran down his spine ended up in his stomach, which suddenly felt sick.

“Who...who’s there?” Tyler asked, his voice losing all bravado it regained the last few days.

A tall man emerged from the shadows of the lobby, causing Tyler and Earl to back up. Four or five inches over six feet, the man was painfully thin, his ill-matching clothes hanging off his body like he was little more than a skeleton. His face was gaunt and his eyes sunken, yet his hair was neatly cut, as was his beard. Still, it was clear he hadn’t properly bathed in a long time and when light struck his eyes, Earl and Tyler saw they were squinty in a manner that couldn’t be confused with friendliness. Worst of all was the object this stranger carried in his hand: a machete, nearly two feet long with red stains smeared all over it.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know who I am,” the man said, his voice threateningly calm. “Who sent you? Was it Sanchez? Robinson? You’d do well to tell me the truth.”

Despite the man’s raspy voice and dirty appearance, he spoke well and was clearly once a man of intelligence.

“We weren’t sent by anyone,” Earl said. “We just ended up here.”

The man looked from Earl to Tyler, a long, tense silence passing between them.

“I don’t believe you,” he finally said. “Don’t you know what happened the last time your people tried to make a move on my turf?”

“Please, we’re not trying to make a move on anyone’s turf,” Earl said, his voice full of panic. “We didn’t even know there *was* turf.”

“They paid the *ultimate* price,” the man said, raising the machete as he stepped toward them.

“We’re sorry for coming here, we’re so sorry,” Earl said as the two continued to slowly backpedal, afraid to make sudden movements that could be misconstrued as aggressive.

“I told him we should’ve stayed away from this building,” Tyler told the man, motioning toward Earl. “We’ll just leave and not take up more of your time. Sorry for the confusion.”

Ainsworth turned and headed for the door but a second man appeared out of nowhere and blocked the doors. This man was no taller than Tyler but was wider than Ainsworth and Ackerman put together; he somehow remained overweight during the years though food was obviously scarce. He was just as dirty as his taller friend but his hair – both on his head and face – was long and straggly and it was clear his best weapons were fists.

“You fellas ain’t going nowhere,” the wide man said, his tone of voice surprisingly tiny.

Since Tyler already tried throwing his traveling partner under the bus once, Earl wouldn’t have been surprised if Ainsworth pushed him into the fat man and made a break for it. Therefore, he took a few steps away from Tyler and stood in the area of light shining through the window.

“I can’t let the two of you walk out of here,” the skinny leader said. “Do you realize how bad that would be for my reputation among the city’s other gang lords?”

“None of those gangs would know,” Earl said. “Nobody even knows we’re here. We just wandered into the city from the main highway a few hours ago and nobody saw us.”

“If you came all the way from I-17 or I-10, then believe me, the others saw you,” the thin man said. “Some other gangs are less interested in disposing of strangers, especially travelers that look as clean as the two of you.”

The thin man pointed to Tyler and Earl, looking over the two men with great interest now that he saw they were well dressed and not as dirty as Earth’s other post-apocalyptic survivors.

“What should I do, boss?” the larger man asked, cracking his knuckles while glaring at Tyler and Earl. “Kill them and hang them

outside as a warning to Sanchez and Robinson's boys?"

"No, please, kill him if you need to set an example," Tyler pleaded, again motioning to Earl. "But let me go. Or I can stay and do whatever you tell me, I can be useful."

As frightened as Earl felt while awaiting a death sentence from the tall, machete-wielding gang leader, he felt equally angry that he might die before doing something he should have done a long time ago. He turned away from the two killers and faced Ainsworth, who glanced at him with confusion.

"I told you we never should've come here," Tyler lied again, obviously trying to find a way to survive while blaming Earl for his own mistake. "Why don't you ever – "

Before Ainsworth had the chance to finish, Earl unleashed years of frustration in a single blow, punching a shocked Ainsworth straight in the jaw. Tyler dropped like a heavy sack, unconscious before he hit the floor. Earl felt strangely serene seeing Ainsworth sprawled on the floor and was surprised to see the fat man back up a few steps. The tall man wasn't quite as intimidated and smiled as he approached Earl.

"I have a feeling that was a long time coming," he correctly surmised. "But I still can't let you walk out of here without knowing who you're with."

Earl did not even put up his hands in defense when he saw the thin man raise the machete and bring it down toward his head...

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

As Tyler slowly drifted back to consciousness, he felt an aching in his jaw and remembered the anger on Earl's face seconds before the fist flew toward him. Normally, Tyler would've been embarrassed or angry about being assaulted but he was too groggy to feel anything but pain and confusion; it took him nearly a minute to remember what happened to make Ackerman so enraged. It wasn't until he tried to massage his jaw and found he couldn't move his arms that Tyler recalled the two strangers that threatened their lives...

When he opened his eyes, Tyler could tell he was still inside but his vision was so blurry he couldn't make out details of where he was. Again, he tried to rub his eyes but forgot that his hands were bound behind his back. He realized his feet were also tied together but his captors were at least kind enough to tie him to a comfortable chair. Tyler raised his shoulder and turned his head, reaching down to use the ball of his shoulder to rub the blurriness from his eye. He repeated this process with his left eye until his vision cleared enough to see what was in front of him.

The first thing he saw was a ceiling; his chair was slightly tilted back. He tried to lean his body forward to place all the chair's legs on the ground but found he couldn't budge it. Instead, he looked down at the inside of an apartment and realized he was higher than he expected, maybe atop some sort of table rather than the floor. Tyler was amazed by the part of the apartment he could see; the huge, wide-open living room was in perfect condition, as if the comet strike never happened. This apartment building had clearly been a chic, expensive place prior to Clement and its owner obviously had superb – and pricey – taste.

Based on the dim evening sunlight that entered the room, Tyler couldn't see beyond this general vicinity, though he doubted the rest of the apartment lacked in quality. Tyler's only complaint about this place far was the chilly draft that seemed to blow pretty hard, as if someone pumped the air conditioning on high. Before he wondered too much about it, he sensed movement out of the corner of his eye

and turned in time to see Ackerman stirring in the chair – also tilted – next to him.

“You hit me, you son of a – ”

“You deserved it,” Ackerman croaked. “And it felt good to do it, too. But don’t worry, I got whacked with the machete.”

“And you’re still alive?” Tyler asked.

“He must’ve hit me with the handle,” Earl said. “Where are we?”

“One of the apartments, I guess. They tied us up but I don’t know what they want,” Tyler said, his voice quiet and slow. “I wish it wasn’t so cold in here.”

Though Earl’s head pounded, his mind was relatively clear, which couldn’t be said for Ainsworth. Earl took a much nastier blow from the machete and yet Tyler’s voice was the one dreamy, his eyes still glassy though he woke first. When Earl realized his chair was tilted and above floor level, the first thing he did was look down, something Ainsworth obviously hadn’t done since he remained calm.

Earl felt his heart come to a sudden stop as he looked straight down, barely able to see the ground more than twenty stories below. His chair was up so high because it was situated on the open windowsill, held in place by a rope connected to the curtain rod. Earl tried to turn and look at the rope but the chair was wobbly and he instantly looked down. The sight made him dizzy. Even though he couldn’t tilt himself forward, he *could* still tilt back and it took all his composure to avoid spilling out of the open window. Earl glanced back over at Tyler, who watched him make the gruesome discovery and suddenly realized what was happening to them.

Ainsworth wasn’t able to control himself, nor could he think clearly enough to realize that staying calm was the only way to stay alive – at least for the time being. He freaked out and started jerking forward, though the movement accomplished little more than to tilt his chair farther back and make the two legs shift dangerously on the sill.

“Tyler, stop moving,” Earl said calmly, his voice barely above a whisper in fear that yelling might make him lose his balance. “Tyler,

the only way to avoid falling is if you stop moving.”

Ainsworth did as he was told and the two remained completely still in their chairs. Within minutes, they heard the apartment door open and the two men walk into the room.

“Look who’s finally awake,” the fat man said. “You two ladies been sleepin’ a while now.”

The fat man had a good laugh but the thin man ordered him to stay near the door. The thin man approached Tyler and Earl with his machete raised; it took all of their willpower not to squirm in their chairs. The man came to a stop next to the windowsill near Earl and brought the machete toward something behind Earl’s chair.

“The only thing separating you from falling out of this window – and twenty-two stories down – is a single rope,” the man explained. “Same goes for your friend. Now if you don’t start giving me some answers, it will be easy for my machete to cut through *both* of your ropes.”

“We’ll tell you anything you want,” Earl said.

“You better,” the thin man said, taking a few steps back so he was in front of them. “Now *who* sent you?”

“Nobody,” Earl answered right away. “We weren’t lying to you. We were traveling along the highway and saw Phoenix from the road and decided to look for food and water inside the city. We didn’t know there were gangs, we didn’t know anyone had their own territories. If you would just let us go, we’ll leave and never come back.”

The thin man seemed to ponder this for a moment before approaching Tyler’s chair this time. Again, he placed the machete against the rope holding the chair in place; this time he began to cut.

“I don’t believe you,” the thin man hissed, “and now your friend is going to pay.”

“No, he’s telling the truth,” Tyler yelled, squirming so much that the chair shifted and almost sent him out of the window on his own. “We didn’t know anything.”

“You expect me to believe that?” the thin man yelled, still cutting Tyler’s rope. “Who survives so many years without hearing

about the gangs that took over *every* city left standing?”

“We just got back to America, we haven’t been living on the surface since the comet struck,” Tyler said. “We’ve been living aboard a seacraft under the ocean for the last five years.”

This seemed to capture the man’s attention and he backed away, leaving Tyler to wonder how much rope he successfully hacked through so far. For several long moments, the thin man looked them over.

“Is that why the two of you look so clean?” he asked.

Ainsworth proceeded to come clean about the entire story of the seacraft, from his early discovery of the comet’s existence through his building of the seacraft to the years spent aboard to the moment they abandoned ship. Of course, he conveniently left out the parts about him murdering people and the way he’d been double-crossed during evacuation. He finished with the way Ben’s group went rogue and left them behind, though he didn’t explain *why* they’d done that.

“If you could let us down, we could work together,” Tyler said. “I notice there aren’t too many women around here but if we hunted down that group of survivors, you could do what you please with them. Heather Sanders happens to be among them, I’m sure owning her would increase your standing among other gangs.”

“Heather Sanders the *actress*?” the thin man asked with obvious interest.

The fat man stayed silent by the door during the story but the mention of Heather finally made him step forward.

“Heather Sanders is hot, boss,” he said. “I still remember seeing her on that beach show she used to be on.”

“And just think, she could be all yours,” Tyler said enticingly.

“I don’t think I believe you,” the thin man said before addressing Earl. “Tell me your friend is lying and I’ll cut his rope right now. After the way you attacked him, I know you don’t like him much.”

Earl looked at Tyler, disgusted with the way he was trying to sell out Heather Sanders and the others to save his skin. A part of Earl’s mind wanted to call Tyler a liar, to end his chances to hurt

anyone else once and for all. But at the same time, Earl realized he'd probably sign his own death warrant in the process; he needed Ainsworth to live if he had any chance of getting out of this situation.

"Unfortunately, he's not lying," Ackerman finally said. "There are quite a few of America's most famous people in the group that left us, including Heather Sanders."

"Where are they?" the thin man asked.

"I'm not sure we should say," Earl said, as much to Tyler as to their captors. "If you're going to kill us anyway, why should we give you information so you can go and hurt others?"

The thin man circled around Ackerman's chair and began to saw at his rope. Earl struggled to keep his composure but refused to beg, refused to give up the others for the chance to save his own skin. Tyler, however, felt no such allegiance to the seacraft survivors.

"No, leave his rope alone and I'll tell you where to find them," Ainsworth said. The thin man stopped rubbing the machete's edge against Earl's lifeline but he didn't move it from the rope as he waited to hear from Tyler. "I don't know why you care about their safety, Earl, I sure as hell don't. We wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for them. As far as I'm concerned, they deserve what's coming to them."

"I'm waiting," the thin man said impatiently.

"I-17 North," Tyler said. "The group is desperate to get back to their hometown in Kansas so they want to travel northwest of here. They're probably a day's walk ahead of us."

"A day's *walk*?" the fat man said. "That's only an hour or two driving, I think Heather Sanders is worth using some of our remaining gas, don't you, boss?"

"You have a working car?" Tyler asked.

"Shut up, Russell," the thin man said. "They don't need to know what we do and don't have."

The thin man took Russell toward the door, where the two whispered to one another. Earl desperately tried to overhear but he barely made out their voices let alone exact words being said.

"What are you doing?" Tyler hissed at Earl. "Tell them what they want to know, don't give them a reason to hurt us."

“They’re going to kill us either way,” Ackerman said.

“Then I don’t want to die knowing Ben Coleman and Heather Sanders and Roy Hopkins and the rest of those traitors are going to survive,” Ainsworth said bitterly. “I want them to suffer as much – if not more – than us. They’ll regret the day they banned us from joining them.”

All along, Earl assumed Tyler was throwing the others to the wolves to save himself. But now he realized Ainsworth’s desire for revenge – his desire to shed the blood of those who abandoned him – was just as strong as his will to live. After several minutes, the thin man made up his mind and approached them again.

“We’ve decided that Heather Sanders *will* make a great addition to our territory, even if possessing her makes us a bigger target among other gangs. I imagine Sanchez or Robinson wouldn’t mind starting a war again if *she’s* the prize,” the thin man said.

“I’m glad we could offer you something so valuable,” Ainsworth said.

“Unfortunately, we’ll want to keep Heather a secret from the others for as long as possible. *She* will make a great addition, but I can’t say the same for you two,” he said. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, but you’ve reached the end of your rope.”

The thin man made his way around Tyler’s chair and began to cut the rope, ignoring the pleas of Tyler and Earl that they wouldn’t tell anyone about Heather.

“This is the only way I’ll make sure you don’t tell anyone,” he countered.

Part of Tyler’s rope gave way and the chair tilted farther, seconds from plunging to his death. But before the psychotic thin man could make the final cuts, a noise made all of them freeze.

“Was that a dog?” the thin man asked.

“I think so, boss,” Russell said. “It sounds close, like out in the hallway.”

This was the first time Earl or Tyler saw a look of concern on the thin man’s face, though his expression quickly turned to anger.

“Who’s out there?” he demanded to know. “And you better tell

me the truth, there are worse ways to die than a quick and painless fall.”

“We don’t know,” Earl said.

“You’re lying to me so *you’ll* be first to die instead,” he said, turning to Russell. “Go out there, find their friends and take care of them. And *don’t* be nice about it.”

“You got it, boss,” Russell said with a malicious grin, cracking his knuckles while leaving.

The thin man stood still and watched the open door for several seconds after his fat friend left. When he didn’t hear anything, he turned back to his other task.

“I swear, we don’t know who’s here,” Tyler said. “But if you let us go, we’ll help you fight whoever it is.”

The thin man shook his head and continued to hack at Earl’s rope, eventually snapping the outer layer and causing Earl’s chair to lean back at a greater angle. Before he finished, they heard another *bark* in the hallway followed by a *thump*, unmistakably the sound of a body falling to the ground. *I wonder if that’s the sound my body will make when I hit the pavement*, Earl thought, though he knew he wouldn’t live long enough to find out. Seconds before Ackerman’s rope totally severed – a machete slice from sure death – he saw the blur of someone – or *something* – rush into the room. He expected it to be the last thing he ever saw. But he soon heard a grunt as something smashed into the thin man, causing the machete to fly out of his hand and through the open window, missing Earl’s neck by inches.

“Get off me,” the thin man yelled, soon followed by the *growl* of an animal. Afraid the slightest movement would snap the rope, Earl dared not budge to watch what was going on but soon heard a *thud* and the *yelp* of a dog. “Your friends aren’t going to save you that easily.”

Ackerman’s world was turned upside down when the thin man swept the chair’s legs out from under him. Though momentarily hopeful of a dramatic, last-second rescue, that hope disappeared when he realized gravity took over and the chair fell from the windowsill. He expected the fall to be long but he came to a sudden jerky stop and

looked down at the ground below; the rope still held though he and the chair hung upside down outside the building. Earl was thankful for the reprieve but didn't expect his rope to hold much longer.

"Don't *ever* touch my dog!" an unfamiliar man yelled, the voice carrying out the window.

Seconds later, Earl saw another blur soar past him and felt a pair of hands rake across his body, unsuccessfully trying to grasp on to him. It took his brain a moment to register who it was: the thin man, whose frail body plunged toward the ground. Earl expected to hear some kind of loud noise when the body hit the pavement but it was the contrary; a gentle breeze was the only sound he heard.

Thankfully, Earl didn't have much time to look at the flattened body two hundred feet down, as his chair was pulled up and into the apartment. He smashed his face against the apartment's carpeted floor but didn't care. Earl was alive, miraculously rescued by an unknown stranger – one with a dog. The large animal licked his face and brought him back to reality, where he heard Tyler asking their rescuer questions.

"Who are you? Are you with Sanchez or Robinson? How did you know where we were? Why did you rescue us? Are you one of Phoenix's gang lords?" Ainsworth fired, barely taking a breath to wait for a response.

Earl felt the ropes loosen around his body, arms and legs as the stranger kicked the chair away from him. When he rolled over and looked up, he had his first glance of the man who saved his life. His clothes were as odd as the others' had been – and for some reason he wore dark sunglasses though the sun was going down – but the stranger was shorter than the tall man and thinner than the fat man. In fact, he looked far less threatening than the other two but must've had a mean streak to him if he conquered them both.

"Thank you for saving me," Earl said, the simple words inadequate to describe how he felt.

"There's no time for that now," the stranger said as he pulled Earl to his feet. "Do you two want to live?"

"Yes," Earl said.

“Of course we want to live,” Tyler said. “What kind of question

—”

“Then shut up and do exactly as I say, when I say it,” the stranger snapped. “This guy wasn’t the only trouble out there so I don’t need you two to slow me down. Do you understand?”

Earl and Tyler nodded.

“Pick up those ropes and follow me, make sure you keep up,” the stranger said. “And Real, no more barking, you almost blew our cover.”

The dog whined but followed the stranger’s orders. Earl and Tyler grabbed the ropes from their chairs and followed the man and his dog out of the apartment.

The stranger led them out of the beautiful apartment building but did not take them far, instead choosing a severely damaged building nearby in which to hide out. He explained that they’d wait a few more hours to escape under the cover of darkness but Tyler wondered why they had to lie low in a dangerous, crumbling hideout instead of the beautiful apartment building.

“Because other gangs are less likely to look for us in a derelict like this,” the stranger said as he continued to peer through a broken window at the empty street. “If you two strolled into a gang building, I’m guessing you have little experience surviving in the new urban atmospheres. I suggest you get down, shut up and do as I say.”

Earl immediately did as the stranger ordered and pulled at Tyler’s sleeve to make sure he didn’t disobey the man who rescued them. The next few hours passed without a word passing between them. Once the sun disappeared from the sky and total darkness set in, the stranger told them it was time to move. He explained that they’d keep to smaller side streets and cut through dilapidated buildings sure to be empty. As they set out across the city, the three men followed that plan, moving quickly but taking cover around each corner, progressing slowly and steadily across the destroyed streets of Phoenix. There were times Tyler wanted to complain to speed things

up but smartly kept his mouth shut and made sure not to get on the stranger's bad side. He was already plotting how this man could help with his future...

At one point, Earl thought the stranger was a bit too cautious until he saw a pair of headlights turn down their street. They ducked into a nearby store and waited until the car drove by.

"They probably discovered the bodies," the stranger whispered to them. "We'll have to be careful the rest of the way."

Indeed their pace slowed even more but after a long night of walking, they finally reached the exact ramp where Tyler and Earl entered the city.

"How did you know this was where – "

"Shh!" the stranger hissed at Tyler.

As they made their way up the ramp, Ainsworth wondered why the stranger was so paranoid though they clearly escaped the most dangerous part of the city.

"A lot of times, these gangs have people guarding the city's exits to stop anyone escaping," the stranger whispered, as if reading Tyler's mind. "We're not in the clear just yet."

As they continued north on Interstate 17 for the next hour, Ainsworth wasn't the only one pondering how they ended up leaving the same place where they started. Earl suddenly recalled the moment after entering the city when he looked back toward the highway and thought he spotted someone watching them. He didn't know how but Earl was certain his mind *hadn't* played tricks on him, that this stranger – his savior – was the person watching them the moment he and Tyler entered Phoenix. The stranger hadn't made a noise since leaving the city and gave no indication that he wanted to converse but Earl could no longer resist the temptation to ask.

"How long were you following us before we entered Phoenix?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the stranger said. He kept his black sunglasses on though the night was dark; Earl was starting to suspect he was wearing them for a different reason.

"It was you, wasn't it? Watching us from the highway when we entered the city?" Earl asked.

“I told you the gangs have lookouts on all city entrances and exits,” the stranger said. “We got lucky on the way out to avoid them.” He stopped a moment and looked behind them, where the city’s buildings appeared as dark shapes against a dark backdrop. “And speaking of that, we’re safe enough from the city to stop for a moment.”

The man whistled and his dog – which had been limping ten feet ahead – stopped and turned back. Though the pace during their city escape wasn’t especially fast, constant tension proved more exhausting than if they’d been running the entire time. Earl and Tyler plopped down beside the dog but the stranger remained on his feet; he removed his backpack and unzipped it.

“Give me the rope,” he ordered them.

Once the stranger coiled the rope and shoved it into his backpack, he zipped it back and slung it over his shoulder.

“Let’s go, Real, this is where we go our separate way,” the stranger said. “You guys make sure to stay out of major metro areas now on, or at least be more careful when you enter cities. Good luck.”

With that, the stranger took off down the road with his dog following close behind. While Earl was shocked about the sudden separation, Tyler jumped to his feet and jogged after the man.

“Wait, I was hoping we could travel with you,” Ainsworth said. “You could help protect us.”

“Sorry, I already saved you once and it doesn’t look like the two of you have anything to offer in return,” the stranger said.

“Please, I’ve been trying to help people my entire life and never asked for anything in return,” Tyler lied. “But you could help us out. Earl and I will be loyal to you. The three of us can help each other survive, watch each others’ backs.”

“Is it really only the two of you?” the stranger asked. “I overheard you telling the story of other survivors to the gang lord. Why aren’t you with them?”

“Because they kicked us out of their group,” Earl called out before Ainsworth had the chance to lie.

Though Earl couldn’t see much in the darkness, he could

imagine the dirty look Tyler shot in his direction. Ainsworth obviously expected the stranger to look down at them for being abandoned but it ended up just the opposite.

“I have trouble trusting people because the same thing happened to me once,” the stranger admitted. “I was with a large number of people before the comet struck but was kicked out of the group. Ever since then – since I was left to die – I wanted revenge, any way I could get it.”

Chills ran down Earl’s spine as he heard icy calmness in the stranger’s voice as the man spoke of revenge. The stranger obviously killed with little remorse – he hadn’t seemed to hesitate to toss the thin man from the window – so Earl wondered if it was good if he and Tyler didn’t stay with him. Tyler, however, had different ideas.

“That’s exactly how I feel about the people who left me for dead,” Ainsworth said. “It’s amazing we’re in the exact same situation. I know it might not be as good as hunting down the people who screwed you over, but maybe you could find a bit of redemption if you find the people who ditched me and Earl and make them pay.”

The stranger stopped in his tracks and turned to face Ainsworth.

“No, don’t listen to him,” Earl said, embarrassed Tyler would make such a suggestion to the man that risked so much to save their lives. The stranger obviously had a mean streak but Earl doubted it went so far as to harm innocent people he didn’t know.

Unfortunately, Earl was wrong.

“Actually, I have to admit I’m intrigued,” the stranger said, genuinely interested. “Tell me more about your ideas.”

As the three men walked into the night, Earl stayed behind the other two, listening in horror as Tyler and the stranger planned how they’d seek revenge on Ben Coleman and the rest of the seacraft survivors.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Not all of the shuttle's passengers recovered from gravity as quickly as Professor Fratanoro or John Fare. Also numerous injuries had been suffered as a result of the crash, ranging from bumps and bruises – which afflicted just about everyone – to broken bones. John hoped that *Destinee* had only been fortunate to suffer so little...

Unloading passengers from the shuttle took hours; removing the supplies took even longer, especially since the majority of people were unable to help. Those who did assist could only do so for short periods of time, unable to carry too much stuff, fatigue quick to set in. Every worker ended up as tired and worthless as the injured passengers, all except for one. Since John refused to leave until everyone and everything was off the shuttle, he continued to climb into the cargo bay long after his muscles felt like they turned to mush. Had his body not been devastated by gravity, this *still* would've been a long day of physical labor. But John continued moving alone on sheer will and determination, defying bodily limitations.

"You should stop and take a break," Lily said. "At least for a few minutes, I think you can spare that."

True to her character, Lily was one of the few passengers to complete a significant amount of work during the evacuation, but the effort became too taxing even for her. At this point, sitting was hard enough but she refused to show weakness by lying down in the sand like all the others, despite her breathing in heavy gasps.

"There's more stuff inside the shuttle," John said, the mere act of speaking draining him of more energy.

"And it will *still* be there if you take a few minutes to recuperate," Lily said. "This isn't a race."

"Maybe for you it's not," John said as he climbed back inside.

Lily and a few others continued to help once the sun began to set, but it wasn't long until John was the last one still moving. Luckily, he finished carrying out the last of the food supplies as the sky turned black and the temperatures dipped near forty degrees, the first serious coldness any of them felt in years. But there could have been two feet

of snow on the ground and nobody would've had trouble falling asleep that night; exhaustion overtook everyone.

Or at least *almost* everyone.

"I need your help reading the guidance system," John told Lily once he was finished working. "I checked the cockpit during my last trip inside and found a printout list of coordinates where we came down."

John pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket and handed the list of numbers to Lily. The computer guidance system tracked the shuttle's movements every second and in the result of a power failure – which obviously occurred during the crash – the coordinates for the last minute printed out on the small piece of paper.

"How could the printer still work if the rest of the computer systems were out?" Lily asked.

It was unlike Lily to ask a question with such an obvious answer but John figured that had to do with sheer exhaustion.

"I'm sure the printer runs on auxiliary power, like the emergency lights," he explained.

Lily looked down at the paper but quickly gave up since there was little light with which to see. But John refused to take 'no' for an answer and proceeded to read her the numbers.

"Like I thought, we aren't far off from the targeted landing zone," Lily said tiredly. "If those numbers are accurate, we're slightly southeast from the area in Texas where *Destinee* was headed."

"Then we need to figure out a plan how to start moving northwest right away," John said. He turned in the direction where they'd have to travel but couldn't see much farther than a hundred feet. Besides, there wasn't much to see out there except empty land, which would at least make *Destinee* easier to spot once they reached its landing spot.

"I know you're anxious to get moving, John, but everyone needs to rest," Lily said. "*You* need to rest now."

"I'm fine," he muttered, though his words slurred together. "And most of these people have been resting for hours. If I single-handedly emptied half the shuttle, *they* can get up and start walking."

John felt himself growing angrier by the second. He knew he'd eventually pay for the emotional exertion but the anger gave him a boost of energy in the short-term.

"I know how much you want to get back to Emily – "

"You have *no* idea," he interrupted.

" – but rushing into leaving will hurt us in the long run," Lily finished. "You're exhausted; I don't care what you say, you've been awake two straight days and you're right, you *did* do most of the work. You're clearly motivated to get moving, but nobody else – not even me – can overcome the strain gravity has taken on our bodies. We need at least a night to sleep and a few days to become accustomed to being back on Earth. *Then* we can consider where we're going to head."

"That's unacceptable," John said, his voice full of frustration. The idea of waiting two more days was almost as bad as Mansfield's decree of waiting six months to leave the space station. John thought that if he could rely on anyone to be on his side, it would be Lily; now, he realized he was totally on his own.

"If you just sit down and try to relax, maybe you'll realize sleep is exactly what you need," Lily offered.

"Finding Emily is *exactly* what I need," he said. John took a deep breath and tried to control his anger, tried to sound like a rational person though Lily undoubtedly would think his next decision was *far* from rational. "I understand you can't risk everyone's well-being by leaving now but you have to understand I can't stay here. I'm sorry, but I am leaving now. I'm sure you can handle the group without me."

"No amount of reasoning will convince you to stay?" Lily asked.

"I think you know the answer to that," John said.

Though moving took a lot out of her, Lily forced herself to her feet. John wasn't sure what she was about to do – he didn't put it past her to hit him with something to knock him out and *force* him to rest – but instead she threw her arms around him in a rare display of emotion.

“Good luck out there,” she said. “You better find Emily.”

“I will,” he said, suddenly feeling a rush of gratitude toward Lily for not trying to stop him from leaving. “You know which direction I’m headed so I expect you to only be a few days behind. I’m sure we’ll see each other again.”

Lily nodded as John took the barest essentials from the supplies: a few water bottles he shoved into his pockets. Without saying goodbye to the others– all still asleep – John slipped away into the darkness of the night, where he hoped he was traveling in the right direction.

The night seemed to grow darker and colder with every step John stumbled forward. Though he vowed that nothing would stop him until he found Emily, dipping temperatures finally got the better of him. He stopped long enough to take out the few articles of clothing – his *and* Emily’s – from his backpack and threw them over his head for extra warmth.

Hazy moonlight offered little in the way of light and John realized he’d literally have to stumble upon *Destinee* to find Emily. Despite those long odds, he did not give up, did not stop moving forward in the hope of a miracle. After a few hours of walking like a zombie, John’s mind seemed to go to sleep though his body kept going. His lungs burned and his body felt encased in a heavy suit of armor but he no longer felt pain, no longer paid attention to physical agony. The only time his mind snapped to reality was when he nearly tripped over piles of debris scattered across the open land. John stopped to look through the first few piles but found nothing of consequence so he didn’t bother to look at them anymore. Earth apparently turned into a giant landfill over the years and John had no energy to pick through the mess.

Still, he tried to keep a close eye on any debris that could lead him to *Destinee*. He hoped to find a trail leading to the intact – and safely-landed – spacecraft but luck was against him for days now and realistically, he didn’t expect clues to magically appear. At one point,

John tripped over something and though he smashed his ribs during his fall, he never felt more comfortable lying on the ground. His eyes instinctively closed and he could feel his mind drifting off...

"No," he muttered aloud, getting a mouthful of sand for his effort. "Keep moving."

The sound of his voice kept him awake and he forced himself back up, regardless of an overwhelming desire to stay down. He continued to talk to himself for several minutes to stay awake and lucid but that quickly came to a halt; he was unable to muster enough energy to move his mouth. Keeping his eyelids open was the next thing he could no longer do and was soon literally walking blind, his only chance of finding *Destinee* being if he walked straight into its metal hull. Even after he lost the ability to overcome the simplest of bodily functions, his feet still shuffled forward, step after step after step.

John's internal auto-pilot finally came to an end ten minutes later. Considering the ground's cracks and fissures in this area – combined with his lack of focus about where he was going – John was lucky to walk so many hours without being swallowed by the earth. For the briefest moment, he felt weightless and wondered if he finally fell asleep and was dreaming about being back in the station's zero-gravity atmosphere. But it didn't take long to realize he was simply falling, having taken a step where no land existed. His eyes snapped open but it was too dark and he was falling too quickly to notice how deep a crevasse he'd fallen into. John felt the side of his body ripped apart as he scraped against the walls but his head whacked into an outcropping before he hit bottom and his world suddenly – *finally* – went black...

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The next thing AJ Brighton expected to see was God, or at least some vision that had to do with Heaven or the afterlife. Luckily for him, the angel before his eyes was of *this* life and not the next. She was the most stunning angel he could imagine and the soft glow from behind her only accented her loveliness, though his eyes still barely opened halfway.

AJ's vision was blurry. Focusing was difficult but his angel came closer and he realized why he thought she was so beautiful: his angel was Irena. Though she was only a few feet away, the small amount of flickering light cast such a large shadow behind her that Irena appeared much farther in the distance. AJ wasn't sure why he felt so loopy but had enough sense to realize his consciousness was fleeting and he might not have long to stay awake. He couldn't remember how he'd gotten here – and he had no idea where *here* even was – as his mind was like a blank book, missing the story of what happened to him. He wanted nothing more than to ask Irena what was going on but words couldn't make the trip up his throat before attacked by a such a severe bout of coughing that darkness began to creep around the edges of his eyes again. He wasn't sure why, but he felt a need to stay awake, a will to fight and remain conscious. He finally stopped coughing and oncoming blackness subsided, at least for the time being.

He sensed other movement nearby but focused solely on Irena's face, which wore an expression of worry and burden. As if he didn't already have enough to be confused about, AJ wondered why Irena could be concerned. Though he couldn't remember what happened recently, AJ somehow knew he'd been separated from her, that this was the first time he'd seen her in what felt like a long time. It seemed impossible they could now be together – had he not almost passed out from coughing he might've assumed this was a dream – so there was nothing he could imagine to leave Irena this upset.

Distant talking faded into AJ's ears as he regained more of his senses. At first, it sounded like white noise, a general sound that

produced nothing discernible. But he soon recognized other voices, voices speaking quietly in another language he eventually identified as Russian. AJ doubted he'd be able to comprehend much of *any* language in his current condition but he somehow managed to catch one word repeated several times.

"Father," he croaked before violently coughing again. Despite the sound of his own hacking, AJ still heard nearby conversations come to an immediate halt. Irena moved her face closer to AJ's and began to lightly stroke his hair.

"Shh," she whispered. "You are very sick and need to rest, AJ. You should return to sleeping."

Despite her worried expression, her voice was calm and soothing. Even though AJ wanted to know what happened to him – and wanted to know why they kept repeating the word 'father' – he felt his body relax and began to fall back asleep. He trusted Irena with his life and if she said he needed rest, that was what he would do. But before he closed his eyes, he noticed movement approaching behind Irena. His eyes still had trouble focusing but it was clear the advancing person was massive. In fact, the man's size was so familiar it helped AJ recognize who it was.

"Father," he said again, though this time he didn't cough nearly as hard. He cleared his throat before clarifying what he meant. "*Your* father."

Ivan stopped behind his daughter and looked over her shoulder at AJ, who could barely focus on the details of the man's face. AJ was proud of himself for figuring out the mystery of why the nearby conversations mentioned the word 'father' so much. But self-pride was short-lived once he saw Ivan's face clearly. An imposing figure, Ivan was always very kind to AJ, especially after AJ helped save his life by dragging him back to the facility following a failed surface mission years earlier. Ivan was also the top advisor to AJ's father and a friendly man on top of that, which made AJ think the smile on his face was permanently etched in place – except when he and Irena were getting in trouble, of course. For those reasons, AJ refused to let himself be eased back to sleep when he saw such a look of sadness on

Ivan's face, his usually warm and friendly eyes now red and puffy.

"What's wrong?" AJ groaned.

"You need to sleep," Irena repeated more firmly, though her touch continued to be light and gentle.

But the sight of Ivan so upset made AJ's desire to sleep disappear, though he realized he might not have a choice as darkness crept around the corners of his eyes again. He didn't have much time before he'd lose the battle with consciousness but he desperately wanted to know what happened. Now that he knew Ivan was crying – something he *never* would've expected from such a big, tough guy – AJ thought he saw the hint of redness in Irena's eyes as well. Knowing her, she was probably forcing herself to be strong in front of AJ.

His mind raced as he tried to remember, though his thoughts only became more muddled and the blackness set in quicker.

"Please tell me," he said, his voice firm though the rest of him was so weak.

"Shh," Irena repeated, continuing to stroke AJ's head as his eyes slowly closed.

Just before he finally passed out, the events of the last few days – the wolf attack, the river, his subsequent walk – popped back into AJ's mind, though he barely had time to think about them as consciousness left yet again...

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Colin drove the car no faster than ten miles per hour but had the feeling that others behind him wanted to go quicker. He kept checking the rearview mirror and saw them inching closer and closer, which only made him more annoyed.

“Why don’t they back off already?” Colin said more to himself than his passenger. “We agreed that I’d stay as lead car but now they’re right on my tail. What’s the big rush anyway? It’s not like we’re in a race to get anywhere.”

Heather reached across and gently stroked his arm to calm him down. Once Colin tapped on the brakes a few times, the other drivers got the message and backed off.

“Just relax, I’m sure they’re excited to drive,” Heather said. “To tell you the truth, I never expected to be in a car again.”

Colin only drove the recon a few miles from Ben and the other survivors before they started running across more abandoned vehicles on the highway. The two other people who accompanied Colin and Heather jumped at the chance to take cars of their own, though Heather was more than content spending alone time with Colin. As soon as the other drivers backed off, Colin relaxed again and enjoyed the ride. It was the first time since evacuating that the two were alone together but they did not need to speak to enjoy each other’s company. The sun shined bright and Heather opened the battered sedan’s sunroof, allowing refreshingly cool air to blow around them. Had the surrounding land not been battered and barren, Colin might’ve convinced himself he was out for a leisurely drive with his girl, enjoying a beautiful day on the open road...

But that illusion suddenly disappeared when he saw something in the middle of the road ahead. While destroyed cars and various debris littered the highways all along, Colin was surprised to see an entire house – mostly intact – splayed across the road. The closer they got, the more Colin and Heather saw how parts of the house broke apart and blocked their path. Colin was forced to turn the sedan into an off-road vehicle to get around the mess, but the fact this house

wasn't totally crushed seemed like it might provide Lehigh residents a reason to hope. If a house could've survived here – regardless of being ripped out of the ground and set down an indeterminate distance away from its original location – maybe houses in Kansas stayed intact *and* in their original spots.

The rest of the drive passed uneventfully, but it gave Colin and Heather plenty of time to discuss their future. As they passed more automobiles and realized transportation might be more readily available than originally assumed, the entire country was suddenly opening up to them.

“As long as we keep finding a supply of working cars, you won't have to say goodbye forever to Ben and the others once we separate from them,” Heather pointed out.

“And the trip to Lehigh should go quicker once there's enough vehicles for everyone,” Colin said. “Maybe we should head back to the group and pick up a few more people, drive them ahead so they can start building up a supply of cars.”

Heather agreed so Colin stopped at the side of the road and flagged down the cars behind him. When the two drivers pulled next to him, Colin informed them of his plans and warned them to proceed slowly, not to drive too fast and get too far from the rest of the group.

“The only time you can drive quick is if you spot something that looks dangerous,” Colin said. “Then you need to rush back as quickly as possible.”

Although the drivers agreed, they peeled out when they drove off, leaving a cloud of dust hanging in the air around Colin's sedan. Without a word, Heather began to stroke his arm again. The drive back to Ben and the other survivors took longer than Colin expected, even though he increased his speed. He worried aloud about the possibility of something catastrophic happening to the group but Heather proved the voice of reason.

“Don't worry, I'm sure they're fine. We probably drove farther ahead than you think,” she said.

When they finally reached the group, Heather and Colin found a significant change occurred during the few hours they'd gone ahead.

Having left behind the severely damaged car – which Ben placed in the back to protect the group’s rear position – Colin was surprised to see more than one vehicle traveling with the seacraft survivors. In fact, he worried at first that the long line of cars could be a band of raiders that took Ben and the others hostage. But again, Heather was there to suggest the obvious, which ended up being true.

“We passed plenty of cars along the way that we didn’t stop to check,” she said. “Obviously, Ben and the others *did*.”

As they drove closer, Colin saw that Heather was right, that many seacraft survivors were happily driving cars, nearly a tenth of them no longer walking. The caravan of vehicles was impressive and at the rate they were finding cars, Colin hoped they could find enough so everybody would drive. Surprisingly, he located Ben near the back of crowd, still walking with the seacraft survivors yet to find rides. Colin pulled to a stop next to him and four nearby walkers quickly accepted the offer to take the car while Colin and Heather walked with Ben.

“What took you so long? I didn’t expect you to be gone more than an hour or so. We were starting to worry,” Ben said.

“We weren’t driving fast but still traveled farther ahead than I expected,” Colin said. “It took a while to get back.”

“I hope you found something of significance.”

“Not much, mainly empty roads and deserted cars, though I see you’ve already made that same discovery yourselves,” Colin said.

“That crazy drifter was right, it’s amazing how some areas of highway have no usable cars for miles and then suddenly, there are dozens of them within a short stretch,” Ben said.

“When we first spotted your convoy, I thought some kind of army found the group,” Colin admitted. “I was shocked to realize we were actually that army.”

Ben gave a rare smile at mention of the group’s success, though Colin could tell his friend was in a good mood since he hadn’t had a single bad thing to say – or a single dirty look to give – to Heather.

“Hopefully we all find cars before we run into anything dangerous,” Ben said. “The way I figure, we shouldn’t have anything

to fear from anybody.”

“Ben and his people will have plenty to fear from me now,” Ainsworth said with great satisfaction.

Sitting in the cramped backseat of a sports car, Earl felt his stomach dip at the sight of Tyler and the drifter’s evil grins as they discussed revenge they’d take when they found the seacraft survivors. Plus, the stranger driving insanely fast didn’t make Earl feel any better.

“Maybe we should leave them alone,” Earl said. “Nothing good can come out of causing them harm.”

Not long after the sun rose following their night escape from Phoenix, the stranger somehow spotted the sports car off the side of the highway, hidden behind a particularly large pile of debris. It almost seemed like the car was specifically hidden there. Tyler and Earl were amazed that the stranger spotted it. The man explained that during the last five years of living in the post-apocalyptic world, his powers of observation had grown especially adroit. Though Earl hadn’t exactly bought this explanation, he was more than happy to give his feet a rest.

Until he realized this car would only made it easier for Tyler and the stranger to locate seacraft survivors and carry out their revenge. It was all the two men talked about since leaving Phoenix. The two now seemed like old friends who’d known each other for years. Again Earl felt like an outcast, the lone dissenting voice of reason among two men that wanted nothing to do with reason.

“I disagree,” Tyler said. “Something good *can* come from this, at least good for me. I’ll finally be able to rest once Ben and the others pay for what they did to me, especially since it was *my* seacraft that allowed them a chance to live.”

“That’s right,” the stranger agreed. “Take it from me, when someone abandons you to die, you’ll never have a good night’s sleep until you get revenge. It gnaws at your brain and dominates your every thought.”

Earl could almost imagine a faraway look in the stranger's eyes behind those sunglasses, a scary thought considering how the man pushed the pedal to the floor. Even on a safe, smooth driving surface, traveling this fast would be dangerous. But since the highway was littered with garbage – large, easy-to-spot damaged automobiles and smaller piles of debris not so easy to see – and there were thousands of cracks and weeds popping through the concrete, driving at eighty miles an hour was nothing short of insane. For what seemed like the millionth time since separating from the other seacraft survivors, Earl regretted his decision to remain with Ainsworth.

The stranger suddenly swerved to avoid a small junk pile and ended up driving on the side of the road, spinning out of control on the sand. He eventually regained control and darted back onto the road, where he continued to push the sports car to extreme speed as if they hadn't almost just crashed. The stranger and Tyler made no mention of the near-catastrophe – as though it hadn't bothered either one – so Earl almost kept his opinion to himself until he realized he wasn't the *only* one that hated going so fast. The stranger's dog was jammed into the tight backseat next to Earl and continued to whine as the car accelerated faster and faster.

"Maybe we should slow down," Earl suggested. "I think your dog is getting upset."

"Quiet down, Real," the stranger said. The dog obediently listened to his master, though Earl could see the poor animal shaking, a line of hair on his back standing straight up. The stranger continued to drive fast and showed no signs of slowing down.

"I don't think we need to go this –"

"Shut up, Earl, or you can get out and walk," Tyler snapped, though when he turned in his seat to face the back, the dog growled angrily at him. "If you're not going to say anything helpful, don't talk at all."

The dog continued to growl at Tyler until the stranger quieted him down. Earl felt a sudden solidarity with the animal and gently rubbed his head to calm him – and himself. When Earl glanced up, he thought he saw the driver look at him in the rearview mirror, though

the look of sympathy might've actually been aimed at the dog.

With every pile of debris that almost caused them to crash, Earl's fear turned to anger and he realized there was only one thing to do, one decision to make about his future. Although he doubted he'd survive long in this world by himself, he decided to take his chances with death rather than help these two psychos hurt anyone. Over the next hour, Earl decided he'd leave them the first chance he got, though he hoped he had the strength to do so when that opportunity arose.

He didn't have long to wait. While Tyler and the stranger discussed the best possible strategies of attack, the stranger remembered something he found nearby that could help them 'take care of' their problem.

"What is it?" Tyler asked excitedly.

"You'll find out soon enough," the stranger said. "It's hidden in the desert."

Tyler and Earl looked out at the barren landscape and wondered the exact same thing.

"How could you possibly remember your hiding place?" Ainsworth asked.

The stranger smiled but that was short-lived as he tensed in his seat. For the first time since Tyler and Earl met him, the stranger lowered his sunglasses just a few seconds while he looked ahead, taking his foot off the gas.

"Is something wrong?" Tyler asked. He glanced at the road in front of them but saw nothing beyond debris and empty road, nothing that appeared different than what they'd seen since starting to drive.

"We're here," the stranger said with a smile.

"Here?" Earl asked from the backseat. "Where's here?"

"Hold on," the stranger said.

Though he allowed the car to slow to fifty miles per hour, that was still fast enough to make slamming on the brakes plenty dangerous, as they careened off the side of the highway. Earl was thrown against the side of the car and the dog crashed into him, the car spinning completely around before coming to a stop next to a

tattered red mailbox on the ground at the side of the highway. Even Tyler was momentarily stunned into silence as a result of the dramatic stop.

“Are you ready for the surprise?” the stranger asked.

“A mailbox?” Ainsworth asked once he regained the ability to speak. “That’s the big surprise?”

The stranger laughed and opened his door. Without hesitation, the dog jumped into the front seat and climbed over his master to get out, a reaction that Earl totally understood. Tyler and the man got out and headed toward the mailbox, neither paying much attention to whether Earl followed their lead. It was no surprise to Earl that they ignored him – the stranger obviously viewed him as weak and Tyler no longer had use for him now that he found a new friend – but it was the final sign that he could no longer stay with them. Even the dog – who’d been a sympathetic ally to Earl during the fast drive – now happily pranced beside his master.

“I can’t be a part of this,” Earl called out to them.

“You don’t even know what’s out here,” Ainsworth said.

“I don’t *want* to know,” Earl said forcefully. “I don’t want to be a part of hurting others, regardless of what they did to you. In fact, you probably deserved worse than being abandoned for what you’ve put many of them through.”

Earl saw the stranger’s eyebrows raise behind his sunglasses and he thought the man appeared impressed. Tyler, on the other hand, was *not* so impressed, his face turning red, contorting into an angry sneer.

“Then get the hell out of here!” he yelled. “The road is right there and you certainly won’t be missed. *In fact*, I wish I would’ve gotten rid of you a long time ago. You’ve been nothing but dead weight to me for years.”

“Fine, I’m leaving.”

Tyler’s cruel words made it easier for Earl to follow through with his plans. He didn’t look back a single time, his eyes pointed forward while he walked away. The empty highway never seemed more threatening than at this moment. Earl accepted that leaving the

other two meant probably signing his own death warrant. But he refused to turn back and could do nothing more than ponder that aligning with Tyler Ainsworth all those years was the wrong decision, one that he'd finally pay for. The only hope of surviving was to find a car of his own so that's what he focused on, not Ainsworth's yelling behind him...

"Good luck trying to survive on your own!" Tyler called out.

"Aren't you going to go after him?" the stranger asked.

"Of course not, why would I waste my time doing that?"

Ainsworth wondered.

"Isn't he your friend?" the stranger asked. "Hasn't he stayed loyal to you for a long time?"

"Loyal? Maybe. My friend? Definitely not," Tyler answered. "I meant what I said about being glad to cut dead weight. Believe me, sometimes you have to get rid of dead weight to keep yourself moving." At this, the dog began to growl at Ainsworth again. "Why is he always growling? We might have to leave him behind at some point, too."

The stranger smiled as he took a final glance at Earl, who was quickly shrinking in the distance.

"Real isn't going anywhere," he said. "Now come on, you'll definitely want to see this."

The stranger led Tyler off the highway and passed several piles of debris along the way. He looked back when he noticed Real hadn't followed and saw the dog sitting on the side of the road, watching Earl disappear from view. The drifter considered whistling for Real to follow but thought better of it, knowing that he would stay by the road and wait.

"Did you hide it in any of this junk?" Tyler asked, studying the piles of debris.

"Nope, it's beyond all of this," the stranger said.

"Are you going to tell me what it is already?"

"Be patient, you'll find out soon enough."

Tyler became nervous the farther they ventured from the highway, especially since he saw no potential hiding spots. In fact, the

only thing Ainsworth *could* see was a huge crack in the ground, a fissure the stranger seemed to lead him toward. He suddenly wondered if he made a mistake trusting this man and now wished he had some sort of backup in case the stranger attacked. To be safe, Tyler slowed down so he remained behind the stranger to have an easier time defending himself.

“You *do* see the hole in the ground, don’t you?” Ainsworth finally asked nervously. The crack was so large and close that Tyler realized they could be going nowhere else.

“I sure do, makes a great hiding spot,” the stranger replied.

Tyler stopped ten feet short of the edge but watched the stranger get as close as he could without falling in.

“A great hiding spot for what?”

The stranger craned his neck over the edge and a grin appeared on his face.

“You’ll have to look for yourself,” he told Tyler.

“Actually, I’m not really the biggest fan of heights,” Tyler lied. “That’s why I built a seacraft to hide in the oceans.”

“Don’t you want to make those people pay for what they did to you?” the stranger asked, suddenly turning serious.

Ainsworth finally took a deep breath and stepped close to the edge, feeling slightly dizzy upon seeing how deep down the fissure went – though he only saw blackness and not the actual bottom. Just when he started to wonder if the stranger was crazy, he noticed a large army crate sitting on a ledge about twenty feet below.

“How did you ever find that crate?” he asked.

“I *found* it on land, I lowered it down to hide it from anyone passing by,” the stranger said. “I didn’t want its contents falling into anyone else’s hands but my own.”

“What’s in it?”

“Semi-automatic weaponry,” the stranger said. “Lots of guns, lots of ammo. Enough to teach any group of people a lesson, enough to start a two-man army that could rule any city.”

Ainsworth couldn’t help but smile at the thought of catching up with Ben and the others, the looks on their faces when they saw him

fully armed. And while Tyler only used deadly force in the past to improve his position in life, he now imagined no better thought than making every single one of the traitors pay, especially Ben, Colin and Heather Sanders.

“Once we teach the group a lesson, we’ll return to Phoenix and take over with that firepower,” Ainsworth said. “Just the two of us. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like we better get that crate out,” the stranger said, unzipping his backpack to remove the ropes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

John was never lain in such an uncomfortable position yet felt so comfortable in his entire life, despite his head pounding and his body aching from hundreds of tiny bumps and scratches. When he forced his eyes open, his mind was surprisingly clear and he remembered everything that had happened, exactly where he was. Stuck in a crack/hole in the ground, he was relieved to find he'd only fallen a few feet.

He saw blue sky above and realized it was no longer night, though he wondered how long he'd been unconscious. Considering the wear and tear on his body, John's head felt well rested. He felt for the bump on his head and found it wasn't as bad as expected; fatigue apparently played a major part in how long he'd been unconscious. A part of him felt better getting rest but his mind was suddenly in a panic about how much time he wasted in this hole; many hours apparently passed if the sun was so high in the sky.

John tried to climb out but found he couldn't move his right ankle more than a few inches, as it was stuck somewhere in the rocky, cracked earth. He reached up and grabbed hold of land at the crack's edge and tried to yank himself – and his ankle – free but found he was too weak to budge. He reached down to dig his foot out but couldn't maneuver himself into position to reach it. Frustration quickly set in and John summoned the energy to thrash about wildly in the hope of loosening rocks. He only succeeded in lodging his foot deeper and could no longer budge it at all.

“Help! Somebody help me!” he screamed at the top of his lungs though he realized yelling was futile. There was nobody for miles in this desolate land and he quickly became worried this situation could become very bad for him, even fatal if he couldn't figure out a means of escape. “Okay, calm down and think this through,” he told himself aloud. “You’ve gotten yourself out of bigger messes than this.”

Thankfully, his backpack was still slung over his shoulder and he quickly took it off, rifling through it, praying he'd find a pickax or flare gun that he forgot he'd packed. Unfortunately, he found no such

object to help him get out. Instead, he took a long drink from his water bottle and ate two nutrition bars, which gave a surge of energy and made him feel like less of a zombie and more of a human.

Despite trying to stay positive, John's mind inevitably contemplated the idea that he'd be stuck here forever, mere feet from the surface yet unable to pull himself out. Even worse was the idea that Emily might need his help – that she might be close – but he couldn't get to her. John continued to try freeing himself but continued to fail with every attempt. After nearly an hour, his body was exhausted and his mind in a panic; he was completely out of ideas. His foot was even more stuck than when he first woke and he was no closer to escaping. When John could no longer remain patient and focused, he unleashed another scream of frustration.

He barely had time to calm himself when he felt a shadow creeping across his face, something blocking sunlight from reaching the crack. The last thing he needed was rain and suddenly had a horrible image of this hole filling with water. But luckily for John, he did not see a single cloud in the sky when he looked up. Rather, he saw a person standing at the edge, staring down at him. As shocked as John was to see *anyone* out here, he was even more surprised to recognize the person. With a single glance, John's worst nightmares suddenly vanished.

"Looks like you could use some help, mate."

Logan Franklin carefully climbed into the hole, keeping his feet braced on the side walls to avoid getting his own feet stuck. It took several minutes to position himself to reach down and grab hold of John's ankle.

"Looks like you did a good job getting your foot stuck," Franklin said.

"Are you going to tell me about Emily?" John asked.

From the moment he saw the Australian, John felt relief wash over him knowing *Destinee* somehow survived. Still, he wanted to know if Emily was okay but Franklin was short with details, offering

him little more information beyond Emily still alive. When he pressed Logan, the Australian said he'd tell him more once they freed John's foot and got him out of the crack. John made it clear he wasn't happy about waiting.

"Just give me a moment down here, I can only concentrate on one thing at a time," Franklin said as he struggled with John's foot.

John sighed though Franklin was going to save his life by freeing him. It took several minutes of yanking – not to mention John twisting his leg in several painful, unnatural ways – but John's foot finally loosened and he quickly scrambled out of the hole. He never thought he'd be so happy to see empty, barren landscape but his relief was short-lived and he began to question Franklin the moment he climbed out of the hole.

"Now tell me about Emily."

The Australian took a long swig of water, far more taxed from the situation than John.

"That's it? I don't get a 'thanks for saving my life, mate'?" Franklin asked.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be blunt but Emily is the reason I came back to Earth, she's the reason I risked my life and left others behind to walk across the desert in the dark," John said. "She's the only thing on my mind from the moment I found out she somehow got aboard *Destinee*."

"Sorry about that," Franklin said genuinely. "We had no idea she was aboard until it was too late. In retrospect, we should've gone about the evacuation differently I suppose, we never should've rushed the process the way Peter Mansfield wanted."

"I'm not interested in hearing apologies at the moment," John said.

"Like I told you earlier, everyone survived the bumpy landing but that doesn't mean there weren't injuries," Franklin said. "Emily was knocked unconscious during the landing but her friend Alex made sure to give her constant attention. Emily was a bit loopy when she woke up – she kept asking for you and had trouble understanding why you weren't there – so I imagine she suffered a concussion. As I'm sure

you already know, getting used to gravity is *not* easy and some people found it harder than others. Emily was definitely among those with trouble adjusting. But considering the condition of *Destinee* after we landed, every person aboard – myself included – was lucky to be alive.”

Hearing about Emily’s injuries was gut wrenching. John hated imagining the struggles she must be having with gravity because of her legs. But she had survived and was nearby; that was the most he could hope for.

“We were lucky to make it, too,” John said, finally able to talk about something besides Emily.

“How many others are with you? How were you able to convince the president and *Mansfield* to give you a shuttle?” Franklin asked.

John proceeded to tell the story of everything that happened following *Destinee*’s departure, from the angry uprising to his imprisonment alongside Lily to their escape with the help of the Russians to the deal made with the president.

“Due to weather conditions, Kovalchuk and his people left first but we were only hours behind,” John continued. “Our landing was anything but smooth, especially since our reverse thrusters malfunctioned *and* we ran out of fuel. Considering our shuttle lost both wings and rolled a dozen times, it’s a miracle we didn’t suffer fatalities.”

“When we saw your shuttle fly overhead, we feared the worst,” the Australian said. “I recovered quickest from the gravity and had the most hunting and tracking experience so I chose myself to try and locate the shuttle. The others stayed behind to have more time to rest and start figuring out the best ways to start clearing the runway, though I guess there’s only one shuttle left that’ll need it.”

“*We* both landed without a runway,” John said.

“But it sounds like you were as lucky as us; I *doubt* the third time would be a charm,” the Australian said. “Now if you want to lead the way, we can go see everyone and make sure they’re okay.”

“*Me* lead the way? Shouldn’t *you* be the one taking us back to

Destinee?” John asked.

“*Destinee?* I’ve been walking for hours to find *your* shuttle. I’m not going to turn around now without finding everyone else,” Franklin said.

“I didn’t go through all the trouble of escaping the space station to delay finding Emily a minute longer than I have to,” John said.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, both realizing the other wasn’t about to give in. But rather than waste time arguing, they decided to continue on their respective journeys alone. Franklin gave John specific details about where to go but unfortunately, John wasn’t able to return the favor; he didn’t remember much from the hours he spent walking in the dark.

“That’s okay, it wasn’t windy last night so hopefully your tracks haven’t blown over yet,” the Australian said.

“Just look for the massive, canyon-sized crack in the ground, then you’ll know you’re in the right area,” John said. “That’s the same one we almost crashed into if it wasn’t for Lily’s quick thinking.”

“I’d love to hear about that,” Franklin said.

“You’ll have to ask Lily, I don’t exactly know what happened,” John lied. He already wasted enough time and now that he knew where to go, he was anxious to start moving toward Emily. He started walking in *Destinee’s* direction before Logan could stop him. “Thanks for helping me and good luck finding the shuttle, I’ll see you back at *Destinee.*”

“Good luck to you, too, mate.”

John knew he was still hours from reaching Emily but it was still difficult to pace himself; in fact, it was difficult to stop from breaking into an all-out sprint. His legs still felt heavy and his twisted ankle made every step painful but he rushed ahead with a new determination knowing that Emily was out there and injured and needed him to be with her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

AJ woke numerous times through the night, his discomfort caused by feelings of hot – from fever – and cold – from low outdoor temperatures. But every time his eyes opened and he moaned in pain, his angel approached and wiped his head with a cool rag. Occasionally, she tried to pour water into his mouth but AJ choked on it every time. Though he never quite comprehended what she whispered, her soothing voice and light touch against his head calmed him and sent him back to a deep slumber...

When AJ finally woke and wasn't covered in a drenched sweat, he knew he was getting better. His head and body still ached but the pain was no longer unbearable and his mind finally felt clear. For once, AJ was aware of his surroundings and realized he was lying on the ground atop three or four blankets. Now that his eyes were open, he expected Irena to rush over to him but he waited nearly a minute and heard nobody rustling around. Also gone were the other people he overheard speaking in Russian, Ivan included among that group. AJ finally forced his tired body to sit up, though he felt dizzy for a few moments as he received a rush of blood to the head.

The first thing he noticed with his cleared vision was a bottle of water on the floor next to him. AJ realized how thirsty he was and drank half the bottle – without choking a single time – before looking at the rest of his surroundings. Directly above was a ceiling and walls were near his corner but the building he was in had yet to be completed. The area across the way was wide open to the outside world. AJ figured this must be the main community building the Russians planned to construct first. He saw plenty of other blankets and belongings in the completed section but was confused why there wasn't a single other person inside – or outside – the building.

Lighting was dim and AJ figured the time of day to be either sunrise or sunset. Regardless of time, he wondered where everyone could be, especially Irena, who he desperately wanted to talk to now that he had his wits. AJ slowly made his way to his feet and stood on wobbly legs for nearly a minute, making sure to stay balanced before

trying to take a step. There was no doubt his weakness was caused by a combination of pain and hunger, two things he didn't see going away anytime soon. He was about to head outside when he spotted something behind his blankets, something he thought was lost forever.

In his excitement, AJ quickly bent over to grab his backpack and lost his balance in the process. He sat back down on the blankets and grabbed his backpack; it was still damp as he pulled it toward him. There were a number of rips and claw-marks all over the bag but when he unzipped it, he was amazed to find some of his stuff still in place. Having lost the pack during a wrestling match with the wolf in the river, there was only one explanation in AJ's mind about how the backpack got here, how *he* could've gotten here.

Mom and Dad, he thought. *They must have found my pack washed down river and came back to find me.* But if that were the case, his parents must be somewhere in the Russian camp and AJ found it odd that his mother allowed Irena to nurse him back to health instead of doing it herself. *Mom must've felt bad for trying to keep me and Irena apart so she let Irena help take care of me*, he hoped.

Nearly ten minutes passed since AJ woke and he still saw no sign of another person. He eventually lost patience and struggled to his feet again, feeling a bit steadier. His first few steps were wobbly but that disappeared the moment he stepped outside. A steady breeze combined with colder temperatures made AJ shiver but he didn't consider returning inside to grab another shirt or blanket to throw over his shoulders. He was amazed by the scene in front of him: numerous piles of wood and other building materials, dozens of construction vehicles and army jeeps scattered about the nearby lands. It looked like the contents of the facility's major storage room were picked up and placed in the middle of this land, which was essentially what happened. The only difference was that so many construction materials were already put to use, as the frameworks of dozens of smaller homes were spread around the vicinity of the community's main building.

But still, no people; no workers building houses, no kids playing soccer, no mothers milling about and talking. It was almost as

if the community's entire population disappeared. For a moment, AJ wondered if he was still asleep, if this was a fever-induced nightmare. But he doubted his body would hurt so much or the breeze would feel so chilly if this were only a dream. In the distance, he heard the sound of the river and he slowly hobbled in its direction, walking over the crest of a nearby hill until he had a better view. The first thing he noticed was the river here didn't have churning rapids he experienced farther upriver; it seemed much calmer. But AJ had little time to focus on the river once he saw something else that answered his biggest question.

A large group of people – seemingly every person from the facility – was gathered together by the side of the river. They were more than a few hundred feet away but were all quiet, apparently listening to a single person at the front of the group. AJ wondered what was going on but figured his parents were probably there, telling everyone what happened during their escape in the river. AJ had questions about that story himself and knew he'd be entranced to hear about it. As he walked down the hill toward the large group, he searched for his parents but couldn't spot either one among the mass of people. He saw Ivan's head towering over the others and assumed his father had to be close to the large man. But when he finally reached the crowd and started to weave his way to the front, he didn't hear his mother's or father's voice; he heard Ivan's instead, speaking loudly in a tone clearly gloomy.

AJ had a bad feeling in his stomach as he made his way through, especially when a few people recognized him and looked more upset by his presence. Whispers suddenly rose among the crowd, growing louder until people cleared out of his way near the front, giving him a perfect view of Irena and Ivan. If he'd had a bad feeling before, it was confirmed when AJ saw tears streaming down Ivan's face. Irena rushed over to him as AJ looked at the ground and saw two freshly dug piles of dirt; he realized his parents weren't *over* here as much as they were *under* here.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

"I'm a lot bigger than you, I think you should be the one lowered down, not me," Ainsworth said after hearing the drifter's plan how to reach the ledge. "I could do a better job keeping you steady."

The drifter smiled but did not stop tying the length of rope around his waist. Having noticed what was going on – and since Earl disappeared into the distance – Real finally turned away from the highway and rushed to catch up with his master, whom he now sat beside.

"I'll have to respectfully disagree with that," the drifter said. "I did years of hard manual labor to escape my bunker while you were lounging around your seacraft."

"My years on the seacraft weren't nearly as easy as you think," Tyler shot back.

Ainsworth took a much harsher tone than he meant, speaking to the man as though he was Earl. He was about to apologize for snapping until he saw the man untying the rope from around his waist. Tyler expected the drifter to put up more argument but was glad he seemed to be as easy to control as Earl and the other weak-minded people who worked for him over the years.

"I'm glad you see things my way," Tyler said.

He stepped forward to pick up the ropes but the dog growled and bared her teeth and did not stop until Ainsworth backed away, empty-handed. The drifter patted Real's head until he calmed down.

"Sorry, I guess he agrees that *I* should work the ropes," the drifter said. "But if you think otherwise, there's only one way to decide this. If you can take this rope away from me – if you *prove* that you're stronger than me – I'll be more than happy to let you lower me."

There was still a slight grin on the drifter's face but Tyler was sure the man was serious. Tyler wished he could read the drifter's eyes but the dark sunglasses remained in place on the man's face and Ainsworth had a feeling the only way the glasses would be removed was if he forcibly took them off the man. He considered attacking

without warning but was pretty sure the drifter was ready for such a move. Even though Tyler was the bigger of the two, the drifter's icy calmness intimidated Ainsworth, especially since they were so close to the edge of the crevice. The drifter had been kind to him so far but Tyler didn't want to take the chance of that changing.

"Who am I to argue with your dog?" Ainsworth asked, trying to make light of the situation. "Just make sure you can hold my weight while you lower me down."

"You can't weigh more than the crate full of guns and I didn't have trouble getting that down there," the drifter said as he retied the rope around his body. This news made Ainsworth feel a little better but he liked to think his life was more valuable than a box of weapons. "Don't worry, that tree over there will do most of the work."

Once the drifter secured the rope around his waist, he walked around the tree and showed Tyler how it would be used like a rope pulley to help him handle Ainsworth's weight.

"Should I tie my end of the rope to my wrist?" Tyler asked.

"I don't think so, if something happens and you need to suddenly let go, you won't have time to untie yourself," the drifter said. "I just hope you have a strong grip."

Ainsworth again wondered if the man was joking but the drifter assured him he was not. This situation made Tyler nervous but he kept reminding himself how great it would be once he had the cache of weapons in his possession, how great it would be when he caught up with the seacraft people. The danger now would undoubtedly pay dividends later and that was all the motivation he needed to grab the end of the rope. He held on tightly and wrapped it once around his hand before getting on all fours and crawling toward the edge of the chasm.

The ledge doesn't look that far down, he tried to convince himself though he didn't really believe it.

"Okay, I'm ready," he called back to the drifter, who faced the tree and took his own firm grip on the rope.

"Go slowly over the edge," the drifter said, an order Ainsworth already gave himself.

If Tyler had been a religious man, this would've been the time for prayer. He gripped the rope so tight that his knuckles turned white as he shimmied his body carefully over the side, watching as the drifter slowly walked toward the tree and let out more rope. Within seconds, Ainsworth dipped so low that he no longer saw the drifter or the dog; he was face-to-face with the side of the chasm's wall instead. He tried to avoid looking down but that was impossible since he had to maneuver his body around the wall's outcroppings and toward the ledge below. Tyler made sure to keep himself positioned directly over the ledge in case an accident happened with the rope; he didn't relish the thought of falling twenty feet but that would still be better than plunging into the unknown abyss.

Now that he traversed the side of the wall, he could tell how drastically it slanted inward, again marveling at how the drifter ever spotted the ledge based on the poor angle he had from the surface. *This would be impossible to do without a rope*, Tyler thought. He stared at the rope above him grinding against the rocky wall and hoped it wouldn't fray or break.

"How are you down there?" he heard the drifter's voice yell in the distance.

Ainsworth was so focused on positioning his body that he almost didn't realize how hard it was to keep his handle on the rope. His sweaty hands burned as they slowly slid downward and it was a struggle just to continue holding on.

"I'm having a hard time," Tyler called out. But since he was out of breath and his words weren't much louder than a whisper, he knew the drifter hadn't heard his warning. Tyler tried desperately to pull himself up but only succeeded in slipping farther down until he had only inches of rope left. "I'm losing it down here."

Ainsworth's heart pounded in his chest as the rope was lowered at a much slower pace than his hands slipped. He wanted to yell for the drifter to hurry up but was afraid the simple effort of yelling would cause him to lose it. Unfortunately, Tyler realized he was going to lose it anyway. When he finally lost his grip, he fell only a few feet before his feet touched down. He looked down and saw himself

perched on the ledge's edge; he momentarily lost his balance and began to lean back before grabbing the rope and pulling himself to safety.

For a few seconds, Ainsworth stood still and took deep breaths, still in a state of shock about falling yet landing perfectly on the ledge. But the sound of the drifter's voice snapped him out of it.

"You made it okay?" the man called out.

"Yeah," Tyler yelled back, his voice cracking in the process. He looked up but couldn't see the drifter looking over the edge. "I made it."

Though it was the middle of the day and warm on the surface, the temperature was colder inside the dark chasm, especially as a cold wind blew. Tyler stole a peek over the ledge but saw no sign of the bottom beyond blackness below. He continued to grasp the rope tightly though his hands were slick with perspiration. With catastrophic thoughts running through his mind, Tyler wanted to hurry this process to get back to the surface as quickly as possible.

The thought of revenge gave him the courage needed to approach the army crate, which was located precariously near the edge. He pulled the crate closer to the wall and safety before prying the top off to peer inside. What he saw was truly amazing, though not in the way he expected.

Did someone already find this hiding place? Tyler wondered.

The crate was empty, not a shred of evidence that any gun or ammo was ever inside. Ainsworth ripped off the lid in an angry rage and tossed it over the side, where he listened for a long moment but never heard it hit the bottom. Tyler wasn't sure if he was more disappointed about risking his life to climb down here for nothing or because his dreams of seeking revenge took a hit. Either way, he was about to call the bad news to the drifter when the rope was suddenly ripped from his hands and disappeared back to the surface.

"Hey, I still need that," Ainsworth yelled. "And the crate is empty, someone must've gotten to the guns."

"That's terrible news," the drifter said. "And I know you need the rope but I just saw something on the side of the road that I need to

check on. I'll be right back for you, I promise."

"Hey, wait a second!" Tyler yelled. "Pull me up first and I'll check it out with you."

But the only response he heard from the drifter was the man's *whistling* followed by *barking* of the dog, both noises fading into the distant and barely discernible over the chasm's *howling* winds. Tyler tried to look up toward the surface but could not see any movement. He never felt more horribly alone and exposed in his life as he waited impatiently to be saved.

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As Earl Ackerman walked alone down the highway, he felt on edge, ready to dive to the ground and hide at the first sign of anything dangerous. He thought about the dangerous people from Phoenix and knew he wasn't far enough from the city to be safe just yet, especially if any of them had cars. Unfortunately, with land being so flat and barren along this stretch of road, there weren't many places to hide. It was a frightening thought to know that he'd be at the mercy of any person who came his way.

Still, he didn't regret leaving the other two and never once considered turning back. He found a few destroyed cars along the way but only one looked capable of driving. Earl struggled his way through a broken window but the keys weren't in the ignition and he could not find them anywhere. If he was traveling the same route as the other seacraft passengers, he assumed they'd be checking for cars as well, which meant it would probably be a long time before he drove again.

Earl barely walked an hour before he heard the sound of an approaching car. He immediately searched for a place to hide but there was no junk piles or abandoned cars in sight; he was relieved to recognize the sports car coming toward him and not some other stranger.

Though who knows if those two are any safer than strangers, he thought, figuring Tyler and the drifter uncovered whatever secret weapon the man hid in the desert. I hope they don't decide to use me as target practice.

Had there been a place to hide, Earl would've ducked out of sight but he simply stepped to the side of the highway and waited for them to zoom by. His survival instinct told him to flag them down and apologize for his outburst but he refused to give in and do that, refused to turn and face them. After a few minutes passed and the sports car didn't reach him, Earl finally took a glance back to make sure they weren't setting up an attack. Surprisingly, the car wasn't going as fast as the drifter drove earlier. Earl didn't know what to make of this nor did he react when he heard the car slowing behind him. When the drifter finally pulled up next to him and honked, Earl stopped. The tinted passenger window slowly rolled down but Earl was surprised whose head now looked out.

"Real?" he asked, looking at the dog. Earl saw the drifter still behind the wheel but Tyler was nowhere to be seen.

"Want a ride?" the drifter asked.

"No, thanks," Earl said as he began walking again. He wondered where Tyler was but couldn't shake the thought he was somehow being set up. The car continued to slowly roll beside him.

"You were right about not attacking others from your group," the drifter said. "I'm not a violent person and I've made certain that Tyler Ainsworth will never hurt anyone again."

Earl stopped again, as did the car. When he looked in at the drifter, the man removed his dark sunglasses for the first time since Earl met him. Earl almost expected the man to have no eyes or some sort of orbital damage but neither was the case, as he looked like just a normal guy. Still, there was something about him that actually seemed familiar, which was just as shocking as if the drifter looked like a sideshow freak.

"What happened to Tyler?" Earl asked.

"I left him behind," the drifter answered simply.

Again, there was something strange about the man in the car, something that still made Earl think he was dangerous.

"Did you kill him?"

"I promise I did not harm a hair on his head," the drifter said. Earl turned around and looked into the distance but saw no sign of

Ainsworth rushing to catch up. “I know what you’re thinking but my surprise in the desert was just to scare him, to teach him there are repercussions for mistreating people.”

“I don’t believe you,” Earl said before continuing his walk down the highway.

“Fine, I’m not going to beg but I just want you to have one more thing before you make your final decision,” the drifter said.

“And what’s that?” Earl asked, though he was almost afraid to hear the answer.

“This letter from a man who once called himself Nigel,” the drifter said. Earl suddenly froze upon hearing the name he hadn’t been called in years. “I always knew that wasn’t his *real* name, regardless of what I was told.”

Still in shock, Earl reached into the car and took the piece of paper from the drifter. When he unfolded it, Earl recognized his own handwriting.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

John continued to plod across the barren, desert-like land hours after separating from Logan Franklin. Every time he walked over the crest of a hill and saw nothing in sight, his heart sank a bit lower in disappointment. He didn't expect to suddenly find *Destinee* parked in the distance but Franklin told him about one particular surviving landmark – strange as though it might be – that would let John know he was on the right trail, nearly to his destination. He constantly reminded himself the Australian had walked nearly a day before stumbling upon John in the crack, which meant John still needed patience, still needed to pace himself regardless of how difficult it was not to break into a sprint.

Your body couldn't handle a sprint for more than five seconds, he thought, though he tried to ignore the aches and pains still ravaging his ankle, legs and head. John set a pace much faster than physically responsible but the thought of Emily took away his self-preservation. Not only was she hurt but undoubtedly struggled with the fight against gravity, a battle that still affected John though he had two functioning legs. He recalled many conversations about this subject with Emily during their years aboard the station, the worries she had about the day she returned to Earth and once again dealt with physical limitations. John always promised to be there to help every step of the way but the fact that he broke that promise added fuel to his fire to reach *Destinee*, to reach Emily.

He knew Emily would forgive him but didn't know what would happen with their planned marriage. If these last few days taught him anything, it was he never wanted another thing in life than to marry Emily. If it was up to John, that would be the first thing he'd do upon finding her, even if it meant carrying her every step of the way and holding her at the alter. But with the president still in space another six months, there was nobody left to oversee the ceremony, a thought nearly as depressing as missing out on helping her readjust to gravity.

John continued to think luck avoided him until he spotted something in the distance, an object unlike any of the hundreds of

piles of debris he crossed paths with during countless hours of walking. The object wasn't large and there wasn't much around it but that was exactly the way Franklin described it. From such a distance, John could not be sure if this was what he was looking for so he instinctively ran, forcing his body to move as quickly as possible though his legs felt heavy and he was out of breath. By the time he reached it and saw the familiar shape of the animal, he fell to his knees and had to stop himself from crying in sheer happiness.

He wiped tears and sand from his eyes long enough to read the plaque below the statue of the animal: NATIONAL MULE MEMORIAL. The homage to such an animal was certainly one of the strangest sights John ever laid eyes on but the fact this mule statue survived when so little else had was nothing short of a miracle. In fact, the mule was one of the greatest sights John ever saw and once he composed himself, he followed Franklin's directions and turned north, spotting a large hill in the distance. For the second time in minutes, John began to run and did not stop until he was out of breath at the top of hill. If he thought the sight of the mule statue was amazing, it was no comparison to what he saw over the hill.

While the last few miles of land were bumpy, the valley beyond this hill was flat and barren as far as the eye could see; John clearly understood why it was chosen as the designated landing zone. At the far end of the huge valley, he saw the glint of sunlight reflecting off of a large object and felt the swell of hope and relief knowing his long journey was about to come to an end. John couldn't help but run again, despite how heavy his legs felt and weak his ankle became. He barely made it a few steps down the hill before his legs couldn't catch up with his body and he lost his balance, wiping out so badly that he rolled to the bottom. Though the fall emphasized how weak and sore he was, John jumped up and continued running.

As he got closer, John saw that the large shiny object was indeed *Destinee* and there was a large cluster of people next to it. He felt on the verge of collapse but the spacecraft was still several

football fields away and he wouldn't stop moving as fast as his legs would churn. He didn't slow down until he saw stirring among the crowd, which finally spotted him. John finally went down again though this time from exhaustion. He did not stand back up until a dozen *Destinee* passengers were about to reach him. He recognized a few faces – including one of ISU's pilots – but didn't spot the one he most wanted. The *Destinee* people were excited to see him but it was impossible for John to avoid noticing that many moved with great difficulty, gravity still affecting them though they were supposed to be the station's strongest and had been back on Earth several days.

"We *thought* we saw a second shuttle coming down," the ISU pilot said as he draped one of John's arms over his shoulder and helped walk him back to *Destinee*.

Now that John completed his long journey – just seconds from getting his prize – he gladly accepted assistance, his body shutting down now that he didn't need to push himself so hard. The others fired more questions at John – how they left the space station, who else was on board the second shuttle, what happened to others once they landed – but he barely mumbled two-word answers to them, completely focused on reaching Emily.

As they approached the spacecraft, John noted that *Destinee* – while significantly dented and dinged-up – suffered nowhere near the damage as their space shuttle. A large crowd gathered near the craft as John and the others approached, though he spotted the injured group lying in the *Destinee*'s shadow. John ignored attention from everyone and rushed over to the hurt people, desperately searching the sleeping faces for Emily. She was nowhere to be seen and one of the others informed him that those people were simply sleeping, not injured at all. He grew more upset with every passing second and realized there were many others missing from the group.

"Where's Emily?" he finally demanded of the group.

"She *knew* you would come back for her," a familiar voice said. "From the moment we learned the truth about the fake evacuation and that it would be months until the shuttles returned, Emily swore you wouldn't wait that long, that you'd somehow find a way to get

back sooner.”

The crowd stepped aside, clearing the way for Emily’s best friend, Alexandra, who apparently took a leadership role among the group in Logan’s absence. One look at her and John understood why. While everyone else appeared as weak and tired as John felt, Alexandra looked just the opposite – awake, strong, energetic. She was caked in sweat, sand and dirt instead of lightly covered like everyone else, which undoubtedly had something to do with the makeshift rake she held in her hand. Made of metal probably once part of *Destinee’s* hull, the rake was apparently used as a tool to start clearing a runway, the beginnings of which John spotted a few hundred feet away, where others still worked. His heart rose at the idea of Emily being there but he knew she wasn’t capable of doing such difficult manual labor.

“Where’s Emily?” he repeated.

John could tell by Alex’s expression that something was wrong; his heart sank as he feared the worst. Alex must have noticed his terrified look because she was quick to ease his fears.

“Don’t worry, Emily is safe, she’s in good hands,” Alex said, which helped John breathe again. “But she’s not here.”

John was confused.

“Where did she go?” he asked.

“With the scarred man,” someone from the crowd said.

“The *what* man?”

“A few hours after Logan left to search for the other shuttle, we were surprised to see a huge bus pull up to the crash site,” Alexandra said. “Inside were representatives of a nearby community who offered to treat our wounded and provide them shelter. In fact, they offered *all* of us a place to live but those of us who could work stayed behind to get this runway done.”

“You sent Emily away with a stranger?” John asked, appalled by how horrible that could turn out.

“I’m not going to lie, Emily was in pretty bad shape,” Alex said. “She obviously couldn’t walk or stand and she was pretty dazed from banging her head. She needed serious medial attention and none of us were strong enough to give it to her. I know it might sound shady

sending her off with strangers but we sent a few *dozen* people in the bus so they'd be able to protect each other. And if you met the man with the scars, you could've seen there was nothing to fear from him."

"You only knew him a few hours, how could you possibly be able to know it was safe to ship off the people worthless to building the runway?" John wondered.

"I understand you're upset, John, but you know Emily is my best friend and I never would've agreed to send her if I thought she was in danger," Alexandra said. "The man explained how dangerous the rest of America could be – especially the cities – so he built a wall around his compound so it'd be a safe haven for good people that survived. He drew us a map on how to reach them once we finished the runway. It's only about fifty miles away according to the scarred man."

John had no idea how far he walked from his shuttle to *Destinee* but was pretty sure it couldn't have been close to fifty miles. Despite his long, hard-fought journey to reach Earth and find the ISU spacecraft, going another fifty miles may as well have been another five—*hundred* miles. He collapsed to the ground in utter dismay and looked into the distance, wondering if he would *ever* reunite with Emily.

"I swear, I wanted to go with her but I couldn't justify leaving since I was the only person able to work," Alex said. "Only within the last few hours have a couple more people started to help."

"Can I see the map?" John asked.

Alex handed him the roughly drawn sketch, which John silently stared at for several long minutes.

"Do you want to go inside *Destinee* and get some rest?" Alex asked. "Since we landed, we transformed the interior into a big living space. It gets kind of stuffy in there during the day but it's still comfortable."

John looked at the ladder leading into the spacecraft and saw somebody climbing inside. But he didn't even consider resting as he turned his attention back to the map, the details of which he burned into his tired mind. The map was much like Franklin's instructions in

that it had general directions and several landmarks to look out for, the major one being a main highway. Once there wasn't another thing to memorize, John struggled back to his feet and handed the map to Alex.

"Franklin should probably be back with the rest of the shuttle people in a couple days," John said. "Hopefully I'll see all of you at the compound one day."

With that, John began to walk again, ignoring pain and his other physical limitations now that he had fifty miles of land to cover. He tried not to think about the distance for fear of growing disheartened. Instead, he focused on the prize awaiting him in the end; Emily was definitely worth the effort. He barely made it a few feet from the crowd before Alex jogged to catch up.

"I know you want to get to her as soon as possible but you should rest for more than five minutes," she said. "I'm sure everyone has plenty of questions to ask."

"I don't mean to sound rude but I could care less about answering questions," John said bluntly. "Besides, there'll be plenty of people to question once Logan comes back with the others."

Alex stepped in front of John, forcing him to also stop.

"But it's getting late, the sun is going to set in another hour and you won't be able to see anything," Alex argued.

"That never stopped me before and it's not going to stop me now," John said, stepping around Alex as he trudged ahead. "I know you think you're helping but I suggest you don't try stopping me again."

Alex turned and walked away without another word. A small part of John felt guilty for being so short with her – he didn't doubt she cared about Emily's well-being – but he was too focused on what still needed to be done to worry about her feelings. He didn't even glance back at *Destinee* or its passengers as he walked away, though after nearly twenty minutes, he *did* turn around when he heard a noise behind.

"What do you think you're doing?" John asked.

Alex jogged toward him, a backpack slung over her shoulder.

"I'm coming with you," she said. "Emily is my friend and she needs me as much as she needs you... well, maybe *almost* as much."

"What about the runway? Why leave it now when you wouldn't yesterday?"

"Because yesterday I didn't know how many people there'd be to help build it," she said. "Now that I know your shuttle survived and there will be an entire second group, I think they can get the job done without me."

John didn't know why, but the thought of having someone accompany him on this journey – the idea of not going it alone – almost made it seem less special, like his love for Emily was being questioned if he didn't suffer alone. Before he could come up with an excuse why Alex could not come, she ended that argument with a simple sentence.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, "but I suggest you don't try to stop me either."

"The most important thing the scarred man told us was not to trust anyone," Alex said.

"Did that include him?" John asked.

"You think I made the wrong move letting those people go?"

Alexandra had been talkative the first hour of walking, which at least took John's mind off of his bodily pain and fatigue. Still, he wondered if silence was preferable, even if it meant dealing with physical agony. John knew that trashing Alex's decision to let the people go might shut her up for the time being, but he couldn't be mean to the only person willing to help him find Emily.

"I don't know if it was right or wrong," he said. "But what's done is done and we can only hope this scarred man was telling you the truth."

"Well, at least we'll find *that* out soon enough," Alex said. "He said there was a small neighborhood not far from here that's amazingly well preserved compared to the rest of the lands. He told us to check the few surviving garages for vehicles. I doubt he would've

told us that if he had something terrible planned.”

“We’ll see about that,” John said skeptically.

True to the scarred man’s word, the two spotted the town in the distance after a few hours of walking. Had John not been told of the town’s existence before seeing it with his own two eyes, he would’ve undoubtedly assumed it was a mirage, a figment of his imagination that placed an intact town in the middle of a barren wasteland. John was amazed a place like this could exist but it gave him hope for the future, hope that civilizations somehow survived as this tiny town had. Even more, it gave him hope that this scarred man *was* true to the word he gave Alex and the others, that the man *was* taking care of Emily at this moment.

“I told you,” Alexandra said. “This has to be a good sign.”

“If we can find a car, *then* I’ll admit it’s a good sign,” he said.

It only took entering a single house to find the good sign John wanted. The neighborhood might’ve looked perfect from far away, but John saw imperfections up close. Houses still stood but lawns were overgrown with weeds – many of those weeds attacking the houses themselves – and the windows were all blown out. Walking among the ghost town was eerie and Alexandra actually stopped talking as they headed into the first home, its front door unlocked. The interior was a mess but a small table inside the door remained in place, as were the keys that sat atop it.

“These look like car keys to me,” John said, quickly grabbing them and heading back out, not wanting to spend an extra second inside. He and Alex made their way to the garage, which was also unlocked. The door squealed as John pulled it open but the prize he found inside was well worth the effort.

“Wow, I doubt the scarred man would’ve left *this* here if he’d checked these houses,” Alex said, marveling at the beautiful sport utility vehicle parked in the garage. There was not a single scratch on the black truck, which looked like it had just been washed and waxed. “Only one way to find out if it still works.”

Alexandra held up her hand and John tossed her the keys. She entered the truck and tried to start it but was disappointed when the

engine wouldn't turn over. John thought he recognized a *clicking* noise when she turned the key though his expertise transformed from car systems to space station systems over the last five years. When Alex got out, she looked disappointed.

"I should've known it would be too good to be true," she said. "Hopefully there's a working car in another one of the garages."

Alex began to walk out of the garage but something clicked in John's mind and he approached the truck, popping the hood and looking at his first engine in years.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked.

"It's not exactly like working on the station but I might be able to fix this, too," John said.

Alex slowly approached the front of the car, where she watched John fiddle with different parts of the engine. Alex knew little about cars – she barely ever remembered to get the oil changed in hers – so she had no idea what John was doing under the hood. When he finally looked up and told her to try again, she was skeptical. But to her amazement, the car started right away when she turned the key.

"You did it!" she cried out excitedly.

John smiled and nodded but did not show the same level of enthusiasm Alexandra did. At the moment, she could tell how exhausted John was, which made him fixing the SUV even more amazing.

"Come on, get in," Alex said.

John approached Alex's door, clearly expecting he'd be the one to drive. But she did not budge from the seat.

"You're tired, why don't you let me drive?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he insisted, though his voice lacked true conviction. "I've walked miles a lot more tired than this, I can handle driving."

John held a hand against the door to keep himself standing. Alexandra was tired from her long day of manual labor, but it was obvious she was much clearer-headed.

"But you haven't had me to help," Alexandra said. "I don't care what you say, you aren't driving, at least not now. Let me drive a few miles and if you think I'm doing a bad job, we'll switch."

John thought about for a moment.

"I'm not taking no for an answer," she said.

"Fine," he finally said, walking around to the passenger door.

"But if you drive too slow, you better not stop me from taking over."

"I won't."

She backed the SUV out of the garage and shot down the neighborhood street, driving as fast as she always wanted. In a matter of minutes, they were out of the small town and back onto the battered and barren wasteland. As they bounded over debris at dangerous speeds, Alex remained fully concentrated on the land in front of her, especially since the sky was quickly darkening. If it wasn't for her seatbelt, Alex figured she would've bumped her head on the roof numerous times during the ride. She hoped the SUV would be tough enough to handle such abuse but after ten minutes of driving in silence, she became worried when she heard a constant noise.

"Do you think I broke some – "

When she looked at John, she immediately stopped talking upon figuring out the source of the noise. During their years of friendship, Alexandra assumed Emily told her just about everything there was to know about John but now it became apparent that she missed one major – and noisy – detail about him. He snored so loudly that she could hardly hear the banging of the truck over the small hills; he did not even stir in the front seat despite severe jostling.

How can Emily sleep next to that? Alex wondered, suppressing the urge to chuckle. She considered waking him up but doubted John remembered the details of the map any better than she had. Instead she let him sleep as she drove the car in a westerly direction, turning on the high beams so she wouldn't miss the major highway the scarred man told her to look for.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Long after the funeral broke up and the Russians returned to their growing village, AJ remained by the riverbank, sitting alone at the river's edge. Now that the shock of his parents' death began to wear off, there was nothing left to do but grieve, tears streaming down his face, splashing into the same river that took the two most important people in his life. At his lowest moment, AJ considered tossing himself into the water to suffer the same fate as his mom and dad, to be reunited with his family in a better place. But the water was so calm in this section of river that he wouldn't gently float downriver let alone be swept to his death. Besides, AJ knew better than to take such drastic action; his parents hadn't given their lives to save him so he could then do something stupid.

As he stared at the river through blurred vision, AJ replayed the story Ivan told him soon after AJ discovered the freshly dug graves. Apparently, a few of the Russians – one of them Irena – had been gathering water at the river the day before when they spotted something floating in the water.

“Irena, she recognize your backpack and rush into water to get,” Ivan had told AJ as they stood near the dirt mounds. Everyone else had dispersed by that point, leaving them alone. Ivan had cried more than AJ when he told the story though that was probably been due to AJ being in shock. AJ was surprised he could still recall what Ivan told him since his eyes hadn't budged from the grave the entire time Ivan spoke. “When she find bag, Irena told us she think you stay behind. But she was nervous because the pack has many rips and many parts of river are dangerous.”

No sooner had Irena returned to the river with her father than they spotted something else floating in the water, something else besides the usual debris swept into this area by rapids upriver: a body, a very hairy one at that. A small part of AJ was happy to hear that the wolf died but it brought little consolation. Ivan told him that the group saw animal tracks along their trek from the facility but this dead wolf was the first one they spotted.

“This was good news that animals still live because we have reason to believe there is another food source,” Ivan told him. “We now send out hunters every morning to search for food. But the news became very bad when two human bodies show up next in the river. Your father...” Ivan had to take a deep breath before continuing, regaining his composure at the thought of finding his best friend’s corpse. “Your father and mother show up in river together, his arm wrapped around her arm. I know is a terrible tragedy that they die but is good that they die together.”

At the time of Ivan’s story, nothing could’ve given solace to AJ. But now that he had time to reflect, the fact that his parents died together made him feel a little better, though he still would’ve given anything to have *one* of them with him now so he wouldn’t be alone in the world...

After finding the bodies of Andrew and Katina Brighton, Ivan and the other Russians feared the worst for AJ, especially considering the condition of his backpack. They waited impatiently for nearly an hour, expecting his body to show up next. Irena was specifically distraught while waiting and broke into tears every time the smallest debris floated by. Ivan finally decided they could not wait idly so he sent several people up and down river, expecting to find AJ’s body stuck on rocks somewhere. The hunters searched the water and riverbanks for several kilometers but didn’t see a sign of AJ. The group even began to wonder if AJ *hadn’t* stayed behind, if his parents took his backpack but put him on the helicopter for America.

“I am sorry to admit but I wanted to give up search, I did not think you were in Russia,” Ivan had told him, shame evident in his voice. “But Irena does not let us give up, she does not believe you go to America if your parents are behind. Irena has much strong-will and does not let us stop looking, even as sun goes down. We search near river but finally find you fifty meters from water. At first, I think you were dead but you were just sick. It was miracle you survive and even more amazing that you were less than kilometer from camp. You have very strong skills of survival and I am proud of you.”

Ivan didn’t need to explain about how they carried AJ back to

the camp, nor did he question the boy about why he and his parents stayed in Russia. Ivan correctly assumed the Brightons remained because of AJ's relationship with Irena, something he didn't need to hear AJ say aloud. The boy undoubtedly felt guilty enough so Ivan gave him one final condolence before leaving him alone.

"Your father was great man, your mother wonderful woman. I want you to know that you always have home with my family."

Hours passed before AJ finally heard someone approaching. Irena carried a bucket and filled it from the river but he had a feeling nobody needed water. AJ's reserve of tears finally ran dry and he forced a smile in Irena's direction when she looked at him, which she took as an invitation to sit beside him.

"How do you feel?" she asked softly. Fearing he'd cry if he tried to speak, AJ frowned and shrugged his shoulders. "I am sorry, this is a dumb question to ask right now."

"It's okay," AJ said, able to spit out these words without his voice cracking.

Now that they were alone, this was the moment AJ dreamed of since his parents agreed to stay behind. For that reason, he felt guiltier now than ever, though there was still something comforting about having her next to him.

"I know you are sad now but you will be happy one day, I will help to make it so," Irena finally said, breaking the long silence. "As long as you live a happy life and survive, you will make your parents very proud."

Irena gently kissed his cheek before standing and picking up the bucket of water. Without another word, she headed back toward the village. AJ wanted to sit on the riverbank and feel bad for himself forever but knew Irena was right, knew his parents hadn't given their lives so he could wither away to an emotional mess. His new life would be difficult but the only way he'd make it work was by being strong, starting now...

"Irena! Wait!" AJ called out.

Irena looked surprised to see him jog toward her. Every bump and bruise still hurt but he fought through the pain, especially as he

passed his parents' graves. Once he caught up, he took the bucket from her and walked to the village, where he found everyone hard at work. Dozens of eyes turned toward him as he walked among the partially-constructed homes but Irena took his hand and squeezed gently, providing the strength to continue on. The large pile of supplies in the middle of the village dwindled as workers carried wooden beams and drove heavy equipment.

"Getting all the supplies across the river must've been an adventure," AJ said. "How did they do that?"

"You Americans think you are only smart people?" she asked. "We Russians have much intelligence, too."

While AJ expected to see only men working, he was surprised this wasn't the case. In fact, mostly women and kids AJ's age worked on smaller houses strewn about, while most men focused on the half-built community building where AJ recovered. During the hours he'd been sitting by the river, the workers made significant progress, to the point where they probably only needed a few more days to finish constructing the roof and final walls.

"Is very impressive, yes?" Irena asked when she noticed AJ staring at the building. "All of us children sleep inside at night while adults brave the colder weather outside. But many smaller houses are almost done so we will leave this building soon."

"It is amazing that something so big was built so fast," AJ said.

"My father is very upset that he cannot help these men more," Irena said. "He still has much... how you say? willpower... yes, but his leg injuries makes him move too slow. Instead, he concentrates on our house though I have not been much help the last few days."

Ivan stood near the front of the large building, speaking with the same group of men who once comprised the underground facility's workforce. Though AJ might not have known many names, he recognized many faces; his father was once in charge of giving these men orders. Before he had the chance to dwell on the thought of his father, Ivan glanced up and quickly hobbled toward his daughter and AJ.

"AJ, is good to see you move around," Ivan said. "You would

like to see more of village?”

When AJ glanced around, he saw more eyes aimed at him, eyes that quickly turned when AJ met them. Growing up as the president’s son, he recalled plenty of instances when people watched him, which always made him uncomfortable. But at this moment, he would’ve loved to be the center of attention for any *other* reason than why people stared at him.

“Actually, sir, I’d prefer to start helping build your house,” AJ said. He hoped busying himself with work would help occupy his mind.

“Yes, yes, please come,” Ivan said, waving AJ ahead.

Ivan’s house was the one closest to the main building and also appeared nearest to completion. It wasn’t big – none seemed larger than a room or two – but it was quite a feat that Ivan and his family finished so much. The most obvious absence on the house was a roof, which seemed the hardest part for a person with a leg injury.

“I’ll help with the roof,” AJ said, making a beeline for the ladder leaning against the side of the house’s frame. He expected to be told ‘no’ – his parents never let him do anything dangerous – but Ivan did not stop him. AJ climbed to the top of the framing, where he waited for Ivan to hand him a piece of wood. Having never built so much as a birdhouse in his life, AJ didn’t exactly know what to do. But he looked around at other construction workers on nearby houses and saw them laying wooden planks along the top part of the frame.

“Do I need a hammer or something?” he asked.

“Hold on, I will show you,” Ivan said.

Irena and Ivan’s wife yelled at him as he struggled his way up the ladder but he waved them off. For once, AJ had the feeling like another man was doing something dangerous to impress *him*, certainly a role reversal since he’d been the one working years to gain respect.

“Please, both of you be careful,” Irena called out with genuine concern.

AJ and Ivan carefully traversed the framework until reaching the wooden plank, at which time Ivan demonstrated how to hammer it in. Due to the limited supply of nails, Ivan explained they had to be

careful not to make mistakes. Luckily, with so much of the job completed, the remaining work wasn't very hard and AJ made serious contributions with the first plank. He could maneuver easier than Ivan and within minutes, the first part of the house's roof was in place.

"Irena, get another wood plank," Ivan said.

"I'll get it," AJ said, rushing toward the ladder.

"No, I can do it, I am not helpless," Irena called up to him. "I have been doing this job since we start to build the house."

The return of Irena's forceful demeanor – some might call it an attitude – was comforting to AJ, who never quite grew accustomed to his girlfriend's emotional side. She was very much a tomboy, never one to sit on the sidelines and let others tell her what she could and could not do. Therefore, it came as little surprise to see her run toward the pile of supplies and grab another piece of wood from the smallest stack. As they waited for her return, AJ noticed Ivan was looking off toward the river and the graves. AJ took a peek in that direction but tried to focus away from his parents, difficult though that might be.

He looked in the opposite direction of the river, where he had a better view of the village and how far it stretched from the main building in the center. Though he'd never see his parents again, this was *his* life now, for better or worse. This was the land where *he* would live, the village that would be *his* home. Suddenly, he spotted something in the distance that did not look right, something he feared might challenge the safety of his new home.

"Did you say you sent out a group of hunters to look for animals?" AJ asked.

"Yes."

"How many men went?" AJ asked nervously.

"Three."

Unless that number was more like three—*hundred*, AJ knew a problem might be coming their way.

"I think you better come look at this," AJ said.

In the distance, a large group of people – most dressed in white – slowly approached the village.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The drifter drove as quickly as earlier but Earl Ackerman no longer worried about the alarming speed. Real continued to whine in the backseat yet three important changes quelled Earl's concerns: Ainsworth was no longer with them, they weren't rushing toward hurting anyone and Earl actually knew the drifter's identity. From the moment Marc Hudson – Ainsworth's former assistant – handed Earl the letter he wrote all those years ago, Earl was in a complete state of shock, barely able to focus on anything but the piece of paper in his hand. He glanced up to see them speed around a large crack in the highway but his heart did not flutter, his mind did not panic. Instead, he merely looked back down and reread the piece of paper for the hundredth time.

The letter was simple, no more than a few sentences followed by detailed directions. In it, Earl explained to Marc about Ainsworth's intentions to leave him behind, a situation he was sorry about but had no control over. At the time, Marc refused to believe Ainsworth would do something like that considering the hard work Marc did to ensure the seacraft was completed. But after listening to other examples of how Tyler back-stabbed everyone aboard the seacraft, Marc considered his abandonment an act of mercy from Ainsworth. The rest of the letter simply told Marc where to find the underground bunker Earl worked on for so many months.

"I still can't believe that bunker survived," Ackerman whispered aloud. "Once we realized the magnitude of destruction that the comet caused, I never could've imagined the shelter would hold. I'm sorry but I assumed I sent you to your death. I couldn't imagine *anything* surviving on the surface so I forgot about the bunker over the years."

"There's no need to apologize," Marc said, "because the shelter *did* stay intact...barely. These last five years might've been difficult but because of you, I had a chance to live, a chance to survive. That's a lot more than can be said for the majority of Earth's population."

When Ackerman wasn't staring at the letter, he couldn't help but look at Marc, whose outward appearance was truly astonishing.

Ainsworth's assistant had always been so prim and proper, always dressed so meticulously. Therefore, to see him with such a wild growth of hair and dressed in such shoddy clothing gave Earl a better understanding of the hardships one had to endure to survive this post-apocalyptic world.

"How did you find the will to survive, even after being buried alive?" Earl asked. "I don't know if I would've been strong enough to dig myself out, especially once the lights turned off."

After hearing Marc's tale of survival, Earl imagined himself in the man's position, one he certainly would've faced had he not aligned himself with Ainsworth and gotten a spot aboard the seacraft.

"Two things kept me going, especially during the toughest times. The first was Real. I knew that if I gave up, it wouldn't just be me that died," Marc said, reaching into the backseat to pet his dog. "And I already told you and Tyler the second thing. I wasn't lying when I said revenge fueled me every step of the way. The thought of Tyler lying to me – *abandoning* me – boiled my blood and warmed my insides when temperatures in the bunker dipped below freezing."

The evil, fiery glint in Marc's eyes made Ackerman long for the time when the man wore dark sunglasses.

"Did you kill Tyler? Honestly?" Earl asked. "I don't agree with violence but I wouldn't blame you if you did."

"I didn't lie to you," Marc said. "As far as I know, Ainsworth is still alive and well. Abandoning him the same way he did to me was punishment enough."

"But what if he finds you later and wants his own revenge?" Ackerman asked.

"That's not something I'll *ever* worry about," Marc said with a sinister smile.

Before Earl had a chance to question him further, Real suddenly barked in the backseat and the two men soon saw why. There was movement in the distance and after another minute of driving, they saw a cavalcade of slow-moving cars lined along the highway.

"How did the group get all those cars?" Earl wondered.

"They must've taken my advice," Marc said.

Ben and Colin continued to walk toward the back of the group, though the number of walkers significantly dwindled in the last day, less than a hundred people without a spot in an automobile. The line of battered cars was so long that Ben and Colin no longer saw the one in front. The lead reconnaissance cars returned on an hourly basis with news of functioning cars ahead, news that helped their procession grow to its current length. Those still walking rotated with passengers in the nearest cars every couple hours, though Ben and Colin had yet to take a turn resting. Ben in particular was drained physically but refused to take a break until every person had a vehicle.

During the last day, disagreements between Ben's group and Roy Hopkins's group grew worse as early effects of starvation put everyone in bad moods. More of the upper level guests wanted to head off on their own now that cars were aplenty, as Ben's order for them to all stick together was closer to falling by the wayside. At this point, Colin wondered why his friend cared about everyone to staying together, but he was too tired to convince Ben otherwise. It would probably be only a few days until they all had transportation, which would speed up their trip to Kansas, though they still had a long way to go through the rest of Arizona and New Mexico. Ben hoped the only thing left to slow them would be replacing cars that ran out of gas, of which there'd already been several.

As usual, Ben and Colin studied the map that Colin took from the convenience store outside of Phoenix. They only had the map a few days but it already appeared well-worn from how much time they stared at it. The group barely covered an inch on the map but the two leaders wanted to make sure they planned the best route to Lehigh before finding the final cars that would allow them to cover the distance in bigger chunks.

"I still think our best bet is to pick up the I-40 near Flagstaff," Ben said. "We can follow that highway for hundreds of miles, all the way to the end of this map. Now I wish we had maps of New Mexico and Kansas, too."

Ben ran his finger along Interstate-40, which disappeared off the edge of the map in the middle of New Mexico. Colin knew this would probably be the most direct path but there was still one thing that worried him about that direction.

“Should we risk getting too close to Flagstaff?” Colin asked. “We have to consider the violence in Phoenix whenever we think about approaching *any* city, big or small.”

“I doubt Flagstaff is large enough to force us into taking a longer route,” Ben said. “Besides, now that we have plenty of cars, we’ll be able to scout ahead and gauge if there’s serious danger.”

Before Colin continued to voice his trepidation, a *honking* in the distance made all the walkers come to a sudden halt while the line of cars suddenly lit up red from the long row of flashing brake lights. The first long *honking* was followed by two more, which was the agreed upon warning signal that someone was approaching. Even though they heard this warning plenty of times when the recon cars returned to the pack, Colin’s heart skipped a beat every time; he worried it would only be a matter of time before the warning was for a car *not* part of their procession.

Unfortunately, that moment finally came. Ben was the first one to spin around and realize the *honking* was actually from behind, from the lone car at the back of the pack. Colin turned and saw a car approaching in the distance. He quickly folded the map and began to search for Heather, who was in one of the cars at the back of the line.

“I’ll find out what’s going on,” Ben said without fear. “It looks like only one car but if you sense danger, make sure you get the cars to circle the remaining walkers.”

Colin hated to leave his friend’s side but at moments like these, his mind automatically focused on what was most important to him. He finally spotted Heather when she climbed out of a car.

“What’s going on?” she asked nervously.

Colin immediately shielded her from whoever was approaching but she heard another familiar sound that helped ease their tension.

“That’s a dog barking,” she said. “The same dog from the other night. The drifter’s back.”

As they slowly walked toward the sports car, Colin spotted the drifter and his dog getting out to talk to Ben. Colin still felt suspicious and considered keeping Heather back but thought better of it; he didn't want her anywhere but by his side in case something bad happened and he needed to protect her. Thankfully, it didn't appear the drifter meant them harm though Ben, Colin and Heather were surprised to see the man was not alone.

"What's *he* doing here?" Ben asked upon seeing Earl Ackerman climb out of the passenger side. "There better not be anyone *else* in that car with the two of you."

"If you mean Tyler Ainsworth, you don't have to worry," the drifter said.

"You know Ainsworth?" Ben asked.

"He knows a lot more than you think," Ackerman interjected. "Allow me to introduce Tyler's former assistant, Marc Hudson."

Earl and Marc told them the story about how Tyler tricked Marc into leaving the seacraft, abandoning him on the shores of Washington. The story certainly sounded like something Ainsworth was capable of doing but when Colin recalled the day he arrived at the seacraft, he couldn't be positive this was the same man who showed him aboard. He stared at Marc a long moment, trying to imagine what he looked like without the strange clothes and facial hair. But then Colin remembered something else – something that happened far more recently – that convinced him drifter *was* who he said.

"That's why you called me John the other day," Colin said.

"If you hadn't shown up, I wouldn't have lost my spot aboard the seacraft," Marc said. "But Ainsworth needed to make room for his *paying* customers so I got pushed aside."

Not only did Colin feel bad that he'd taken this man's spot, he felt worse that he never realized the man who brought him aboard was missing from the seacraft during all the years spent aboard. A single glance at Heather let Colin know she felt the exact same thing.

"I'm sorry, I feel responsible for what happened to you," Colin said.

“Don’t,” Marc said simply. “There was only one man that doomed me and that was Tyler Ainsworth.”

Marc went on to give a brief synopsis of his tale of survival, as well as plans to enact revenge on the man that ended up most hated aboard the craft.

“I assume you found Ainsworth and got your revenge?” Ben asked excitedly.

“Let’s just say I returned the favor by abandoning *him* in the worst place imaginable,” Marc said. “But now that I’ve dealt with him, there’s only one place I’ve seen the last five years where I’d want to go; it just happens to be on the way to Kansas.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

JUNE 25, 2025

FOUR YEARS, TEN MONTHS, THREE DAYS AFTER IMPACT...

Two days after leaving *Destinee's* landing site – two days of non-stop traveling without breaks – John and Alexandra finally spotted a walled compound off the side of the main highway. Even from far away, they could tell the wall was huge, exactly as the scarred-man described it to Alex and the other *Destinee* passengers.

“That *has* to be it,” John said with hopeful desperation. “Hurry up, Emily might need our help.”

Neither was physically capable of running, as they'd been walking more than twenty-four hours straight. They covered a lot of ground in the SUV but hadn't started off with much gas. The vehicle guzzled fuel so quickly that it soon died, but not before they reached the main highway, the most important landmark to find according to the scarred-man. Despite fatigue, John pushed himself to shuffle forward as quickly as he could, even though the compound was half a mile away. Alex was undoubtedly in the best shape of *anyone* aboard the station but was completely exhausted by this point. She was amazed by John's strength to keep going pushing forward and knew he was moving on willpower alone. For him to summon the ability to jog seemed more unlikely, though she could not let him continue.

“John, you have to slow down!” she called out.

“Don't worry, you'll catch up eventually,” he responded.

Alex expended her limited energy by running to catch up, grabbing his arm in an attempt to stop him. John was so focused on reaching the compound – so focused on reaching Emily – that he practically dragged Alex ahead. He didn't stop until she finally yanked his arm so hard that she fell to the ground after losing her grip.

“Are you okay?” John asked, offering a hand to help her up. Alexandra ignored it.

“We shouldn't rush into this,” Alex said. “The scarred-man warned us to be weary of others so I think we need to make sure this is the right place before running toward them. That might be

misconstrued as an act of aggression if this isn't the right place."

"How could we have the wrong place?" John asked. "Ever since we left that neighborhood, we haven't seen *anything*. We followed the map's directions and now that we reached the end, you think there might be a *second* walled compound?"

John wasn't buying this and Alex questioned why she was getting cold feet. Still, she knew they came too far to take unnecessary risks, though it would be difficult to convince John.

"It's your duty to Emily to be careful and not take the chance of getting hurt... or worse," Alexandra said, playing the only card she had left, the only one that John might listen to. "We need to be careful so nothing gets in the way of two you reuniting."

"Okay, you're right," he finally said. "But if you try convincing me to wait until dark to approach the wall, I'll scream."

Alexandra mustered a smile but thought it actually *would* be better if they waited for nightfall. She knew John would never go for that and settled on a slow approach toward the compound. As they walked forward, both looked for any sign of movement within the walls but saw nobody milling about the large areas of empty space. There was no sign of the reinforced bus that Alexandra told him showed up at *Destinee*, a fact that made John increasingly nervous with every step.

"I thought you said this guy described the compound as a beautiful place," he said. "Does *that* look nice to you?"

"Not really," Alex admitted. All they could see within the compound was a large barn and a few other buildings, none especially impressive. In fact, the best thing Alex could say about them was that they were still standing, more than could be said for the majority of buildings across the country.

"I don't have a good feeling about this. You never should've trusted that guy. If the bus isn't even here, he might not have brought Emily or the others to this place," John said.

His mind wandered to every dark place imaginable, picturing this scarred-man as everything from a swindler preying on the weak to a murderous psychotic doing God-knows-what to Emily. Even Alex

started to doubt her ability to read people, though she prayed she hadn't been wrong about the scarred-man's intentions.

"Maybe the bus is parked on the other side of the building that we can't see," Alexandra offered weakly.

But just as the two began to grow concerned, they saw a few children emerge from the biggest dilapidated building and head toward the barn. The kids seemed to be having a good time, which they hoped was a sign that nothing nefarious was happening.

"Hello!" John called out once they got close to the wall. "Can anyone in there hear me?"

Through a few tiny cracks in the wall, John and Alexandra saw the children scatter at the sound of an outside voice, immediately entering the barn. A few moments later, several men emerged from the barn brandishing weapons. John wasn't totally convinced this situation was safe but Alex smiled upon recognizing one of them.

"You see the one dressed in all black?" she asked. "That's him, that's the man with the scars."

As the black-clad man got closer, John realized why he was known for his scars, which appeared horribly painful. But based on the way he brandished his makeshift weapon – holding it like he'd used it before – John wondered if he was really as friendly as Alex claimed.

"We don't want trouble here but we're prepared to defend ourselves," the scarred-man called out.

John saw the man in black – clearly the leader – directing other men toward ladders along the wall, obviously getting into position to fight if necessary. If Emily really was inside these walls, John felt better knowing she was well-protected.

"It's me! Alexandra! From the shuttle crash," she called back. "You told us to come here when we were ready."

Since the man's face was so disfigured, it was hard to determine any change in his expression. But John did see the man gesture toward his other fighters, a sign John hoped did not mean attack. Seconds later, a section of the wall opened and the scarred-man waved them over. As soon as they were inside, he gave the order to close the

wall before turning back to the newcomers. This time, the heavy scar tissue around his mouth curled slightly up.

“Welcome to our home, I’m sorry we did not see you approach sooner,” the man said. “I’m actually embarrassed you were able to sneak up on us. I bragged about our security and how safe it is and yet we’ve made a horrible first impression. I assure you, I almost always have someone guarding the wall but we’ve been busy here recently.”

“Please, there’s no need to apologize,” Alex said. “I should be the one saying sorry. You spent hours trying to convince me to come here only to be turned down; then I show up a few days later. I bet you never expected to see me so soon.”

“You? No,” the scarred-man said before turning to John. “But him? Yes. I suspect you’re John?”

He extended his hand to John.

“How did you know my name?”

“Emily said you’d come for her soon,” the man answered.

The mention of Emily’s name caused John’s heart to skip. For a moment, he felt tongue-tied and did not know what to say until he finally muttered a few words.

“She’s here?” he asked.

“Of course she is,” the scarred-man said. “Isn’t that why you came?”

“And she’s okay?”

The scarred-man clasped John on the shoulder and smiled; John understood for the first time why Alexandra trusted him.

“Of course, she’s one tough girl,” the man said. “I’m sure she’s as desperate to see you as you are her. She’s been talking about you the whole time.”

“Can I see her?”

The scarred-man turned to his few men and ordered them to stand guard at their posts along the wall.

“I imagine she’s still resting in her room,” the scarred-man said. “Come this way.”

While the three walked into the barn, Alexandra regaled the scarred-man with what happened in the last few days since he left *Destinee* with Emily and the injured station passengers. John focused every time he heard mention of Emily's name but just as quickly tuned them out when their conversation went elsewhere. This moment felt too surreal for John – like he was in some kind of dream – and he hardly noticed his surroundings as they passed through the barn and climbed a set of stairs.

"It's much nicer than I expected," Alexandra said. "From outside, we thought this place might be abandoned, didn't we, John? ...John?"

"Huh?" he asked, clearly not paying attention.

"We purposely did that," the scarred-man said. "We don't want to advertise to others how nice we've got it here. And if you think the barn is nice, wait until you see our huge garden and the underground parking space."

"John and I would love to see them, wouldn't we, John?"

This time, John didn't bother to respond at all.

"I'm sorry, his mind is obviously elsewhere at the moment," Alex said.

"I'd expect nothing less," the scarred-man said. "If he misses Emily half as much as she misses him, then I can understand why he can't concentrate on anything else."

"What about Emily?" John asked, snapping out of his reverie at the mention of her name.

"Once we brought her here and her confusion from the concussion began to clear, she grew upset that she was taken from the *Destinee*," the scarred-man explained. "She knew you'd come from the space station for her, knew you were on the second shuttle that so many people saw fly overhead. I planned to go after that shuttle as well but someone from *Destinee* already headed out to check on the shuttle."

"Logan Franklin," Alex interjected. "He was our best tracker."

"Emily threatened to head back to *Destinee* once she regained some of her strength," the scarred-man said. "I truly believe she

planned on following through with that. I'm glad you're here now, I was afraid that the time would eventually come when I found her room empty and Emily gone."

Every time John heard how Emily felt about him, warmth rushed through his body. Utter exhaustion – of which he suffered physically, mentally and especially emotionally – had him on the verge of breaking down and he couldn't wait to find Emily and end this ordeal. By the time they reached the end of the hallway, his heart pumped so fast that he thought it might explode; he constantly had to remind himself to breathe.

"This is it. Since Emily was hurt worst of the passengers, we gave her the biggest guestroom," the scarred-man said. "Actually, it's our *only* guestroom. All other passengers have been sharing rooms with the – well, I'm sure you're not interested in that right now."

The scarred-man had no idea how correct he was. He stepped aside and gestured John toward the door. For a moment, John's feet felt glued to the floor. This was the moment he waited for; it felt like years though it was actually less than a week since the night before their wedding, the last time John and Emily were together. He came all the way from space to find her – fought his way to escape the heavens to be by her side – but somehow didn't know how to proceed at the end. Finally, he tapped lightly on the door.

"Emily?" he asked.

When he didn't receive a response, John assumed she must be resting. He figured she'd forgive him for waking her up. He knocked lightly and said her name again before trying the doorknob, which was unlocked. But when John opened the door and looked inside the simple room, his heart sank again. A sensation of dread gripped his insides upon seeing the room completely empty.

"She's not here," he whispered in surprise. When he repeated himself, he did so much more forcefully. His voice was angry and he looked directly at the scarred-man, as though blaming him and questioning everything the man said. "*She's not here.*"

The man's brow furrowed in confusion, or at least that's what John thought it had done beneath the scars. The man made his way

past John and looked into the room, as if he had trouble believing Emily wasn't there.

"I don't know where she's at," he said. "The last I knew, she was up here resting."

John immediately guarded Alexandra from the scarred-man, as if this was some sort of setup. Although totally exhausted, the thought that they were in danger sent a surge through his body and readied him for a fight.

"I want to know where Emily is at *right now*," he demanded.

"Calm down, son, I'm sure there's a rational explanation," the scarred-man said. "We'll find her."

The man's voice was soothing but the sudden appearance of a crowd at the other end of the hallway – blocking their only escape route – raised John's tension level. But thankfully, Alex recognized other injured *Destinee* passengers among the crowd, none of whom appeared in any sort of distress. Still, an approaching *thumping* continued to worry John, until the final moment when the group of people parted and made way for a young lady who moved with the help of wooden crutches.

Emily still had a large bruise on the side of her forehead and her hair was disheveled but John never remembered her looking so beautiful. Nobody spoke as he walked toward her – no words were needed – but as focused as John was on Emily's face, he still noticed one other thing about her. On the fourth finger on her left hand was the ring John had given her. She dropped her crutches and threw her arms around his neck. He had to hold all of her weight but didn't care; nothing ever felt better in his arms.

"I knew you'd come," Emily said through heavy tears. "I knew you were on that second shuttle."

"Nothing was going to stop me getting back to you," John said, fighting tears of his own.

"I'm so sorry I got aboard *Destinee* and ruined our wedding," Emily said. "I can't believe we have to wait another six months for the president to come down and marry us."

John smiled when he heard Emily speak the exact thing he was

thinking.

“That’s okay, none of that matters as long as we’re together,” he said.

When they finally separated, John picked up Emily’s crutches as the scarred-man cleared his throat to get their attention. John suddenly felt guilty for questioning him but the scarred-man did not give him an opportunity to apologize.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but I might be able to help you with that problem,” the scarred-man said. “I’m actually a pastor – or at least I was in my previous life before the comet. I’d be more than happy to conduct your wedding if you don’t want to wait. It’s probably the closest thing you’ll get to being official.”

“You’d actually be willing to do that for us?” John asked, feeling more ashamed for doubting him.

“Of course, I’d be honored to join together two people so obviously in love,” the scarred pastor said.

“Thank you so much, Pastor Mike,” Emily said.

“We can wait for the others to arrive from the shuttle if you want a bigger audience,” the pastor said.

“No,” John said curtly. “I mean, I don’t want to wait one day longer than I have to. We’ve already been separated once and I’m not taking the chance of losing her again.”

John hadn’t thought he’d see Emily smile any wider until she heard him say this.

“Okay, but we’ll have to at least wait until morning. I haven’t done a sunrise ceremony in a long time, that should be nice,” the pastor said. “We’ll leave the three of you alone so you can become acquainted with the compound.”

Once the pastor and the others left, Alex retired to Emily’s room so she could get much-needed rest. John was sure his body could sleep for days but going to sleep was the farthest thing from his mind. Now that he was with Emily, he wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. She led him out of the barn and started a tour of the compound.

CHAPTER FORTY

“I’ve only taken a quick pass through the few buildings but I’m pretty amazed by what I’ve seen so far,” Emily said.

Emily looked shaky as she walked on the two crutches but she made a point of not accepting John’s help, clearly something he’d have to grow accustomed to. This was the first time he spent with her on Earth, the first time she had to struggle in front of him instead of floating around in zero gravity. While it was hard for John to watch her grapple with physical limitations, the fact that she wanted no help – the fact that she fought so hard to move – made John realize why he loved her so much. John felt the eyes of other people watching them as they passed through the large barn but figured that was to be expected.

Once they had more privacy outside, John felt freer to speak his mind about the compound.

“I’ll admit, the barn was much nicer inside than I expected,” John said. “But are you going to tell me *that* building is anything more than a dilapidated mess? It doesn’t even have a roof.”

While the barn appeared to have had serious work done to it by the pastor and the other inhabitants, the largest building in the middle of the compound looked like a total relic, nothing more than four walls that somehow survived the comet strike. With no roof covering its interior, John had no idea how anyone could speak so glowingly about it. But based upon Emily’s mischievous grin, he knew there was something he must be missing.

“I guess you’ll have to find out for yourself,” Emily said, leading the way across open land. “Even if it wasn’t for the barn or the bigger building, I’d *still* love everything about this place. Everyone is friendly here and it’s amazing how everyone seemed to find their way here, how they’ve accepted everyone into their community as long as they’re willing to work and help out.”

Nearby, a group of children played baseball with a large rock and a piece of scrap wood. When the kids saw Emily and John approach, they immediately ditched the game and ran over to them.

At first, the kids – who appeared to range in age from five to maybe eight or nine – seemed shy until a little girl finally stepped forward.

“Is it true you two really lived in outer space?” she asked.

“Yes we did,” Emily answered. “And my friend John here got to float in space and fix the space station we lived in.”

The children were clearly impressed and looked at John in awe.

“What happened to your legs? Did you hurt them in space?”

“No, I hurt them a long time ago in a car accident,” Emily said.

“Oh, well, do either of you want to play this game with us?” the little girl asked. “Pastor Mike and Jeff told us it’s called basketball and it used to be real popular before the comet.”

“Not *basketball*,” one of the other kids interrupted. “Basketball is where we throw the ball in the bucket, remember? This one is called *baseball*. Have either of you ever played before?”

“Not me but my best friend used to be the best player in our whole school,” John said.

“I used to go to school,” said the boy who appeared oldest in the group. “But I don’t remember much because I was little back then. The other kids here are too young to ever go to school.”

“Do you want to learn how to play baseball with us? It’s real easy,” the little girl explained. “All you have to do is hit the ball with the stick.”

“It’s not a stick, don’t you remember what they taught us? It’s called a *bat*,” the oldest boy corrected her.

“We’d love to learn but maybe some other time,” Emily said. “John just got here and wants to see the rest of the compound and then he needs to sleep. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Okay,” the little girl said as she led the others back to their game.

As Emily brought John toward the next building, he was no more impressed when closer. In fact, the building looked more decayed and abandoned up close. But then Emily opened the door and it took a single glance for John to realize how wrong he was. Bright colors seemed to shine from inside, a stark contrast to the monochromatic landscape of the barren new world. John quickly

realized why this building not only missed its roof, but did not need one in the first place.

“It’s a garden,” he said, staring at rows upon rows of fruits and vegetables. The plants were packed tightly inside the building, though there were plenty of narrow aisles between them where John saw many compound inhabitants working away. Tomatoes and cucumbers were planted in the section closest to the building’s entrance but a quick glance showed that there was plenty else here.

“How can this be?” John asked. “How can they get such vegetation to grow in here when there’s nothing but weeds in the rest of the world? After all, we’re in the middle of the desert.”

“Actually, that’s not especially the case,” Emily answered, walking down the first row. For the first time in days, John realized how hungry he felt and had the urge to start pulling food straight from the ground. “A lot of the area around here *used to be* arid but as I’m sure you could tell with everything else in the world, *nothing* is the same as it used to be. The desert meets the plains close to here and the massive quakes have pushed plenty of soil up closer to the surface. All it takes to find it is a little extra digging.”

“But what about everything they need to make this possible? All the building and farming supplies?” John asked.

“All homemade from debris they found, at least that’s what I was told,” Emily answered. “And that’s including the wall. Pastor Mike often sends out people – or goes himself – on scavenging missions to see what kind of junk they can find to be used for building materials. I’ve been told they sometimes travel miles to see what can be found.”

“Sounds dangerous,” John said. “And if they go so far from the compound, how can they carry much back?”

Emily grinned.

“I was hoping you’d ask,” she said. “And if what you’ve told me over the years is true, I’m *positive* you’ll love the next part of this tour.”

They ended up back outside of the garden building but instead of heading toward the barn, Emily led John in the opposite direction,

toward the rear of the compound, which appeared completely deserted. He pressed her for more information but she remained coy about where she was taking him. It took several minutes to make the long trek, further proof about how deceptively large the compound was. Emily continued to struggle along on her crutches but it was amazing to John how quickly he grew accustomed to seeing her use them.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see,” she promised. “It’s just ahead.”

As if perfectly on cue, John suddenly saw a man appear at the far end of the compound, as though he emerged from the earth. When they got closer, John spotted a ramp leading into the ground – a *huge* ramp.

“It’s true that they have underground parking here?” he asked in amazement. “No wonder Alexandra and I couldn’t see the bus.”

“If you like cars as much as you say, wait until you see this,” Emily said.

When they reached the man, Emily introduced John to the compound’s mechanic, who admittedly had limited knowledge when it came to making major automotive repairs.

“I used to fix my car when it broke but that involved simple things; oil changes, fixing tires, changing brakes and spark plugs, basic stuff I could figure out if I had a free afternoon,” the mechanic said. “Needless to say, I had no formal training. But since I was the one with car knowledge here, this became my main duty. Wish I could do more but it’s kind of tough without proper tools or supplies.”

“I used to work on cars, too, I might be able to help out,” John said.

“Good, ‘cause we have a lot of work to be done,” the mechanic said. “Check it out.”

John walked close next to Emily down the ramp but she kept her balance on the incline. From the small amount of light that filtered down, John could tell the room down here was spacious. It wasn’t until the mechanic switched the lights on that he saw how truly large it was. He expected to see four or five cars – along with a

small bus – jammed into an oversized basement but nothing could’ve been further from the truth. As light upon light flickered overhead, John saw six rows of cars nearly a dozen deep, *plus* room to spare. Parked at the back of the underground garage was the large, cross-country bus that took Emily and others here.

“Do you see how they’re able to gather and bring back large amounts of debris at a time?” Emily asked. “Not to mention dozens of injured spacecraft survivors.”

The dangerous ‘scavenger’ missions no longer seemed so perilous when John realized the compound people had such a fleet of vehicles to choose from.

“Where did all this come from?” John asked in awe, as though he just entered Car Heaven.

“We assume there used to be a building here with a large underground parking garage of some sort,” the mechanic explained. “It seems strange such a building would be so close to a barn but there was no other evidence remaining of what was here before the strike.”

“A building was totally obliterated and yet a barn and dilapidated building survived?” John asked.

“Believe me, I’ve seen stranger things in the world,” the mechanic said. “There’s no sort of explanation about why some things survived and others didn’t. But as far as cars go, I think we collected every workable car on the highway within a fifty-mile radius. And we siphoned gasoline from every unusable vehicle, which is how we have such a large supply to power the generator down here.” Against another wall were about a dozen drums of gasoline. “I imagine we’ll eventually run out of gas and not be able to work down here, which is why I want to get as many of these in working order as possible.”

“There’s a perfectly preserved SUV about twenty miles down the road,” John said. “As long as you put gas in it, it runs great.”

“That’s good, it’s been a few months since Pastor Mike gave me the okay to leave to look for more cars. We pretty much picked the area clean but it’ll be nice to take a drive,” the mechanic said.

The mechanic led John and Emily to the car he was currently fixing, a luxury sedan that appeared in very good condition but

apparently had damage under the hood.

“It ran good until we got it here and then it wouldn’t start,” the mechanic explained. “I’ve been working on it a while now. Normally, I would’ve hauled it out of here and scrapped it but its exterior suffered such little damage, I’d hate to give up on it, not that appearance matters anymore...”

The hood was already popped open and John immediately stuck his head underneath to take a look.

“I see how it is, the second you have a toy to play with, you forget about how much you missed me,” Emily joked.

“It’s nice to work on something without running the risk of killing myself if I make the wrong move,” John said. He noticed the mechanic looking at him questioningly. “I guess you could say the work I’ve been doing recently has been on a larger scale than this.”

The mechanic’s face brightened in understanding.

“So it’s true? You *did* help with repairs on the space station?” he asked.

John stood tall and glanced at Emily.

“I see you’ve been talking about me,” John said.

“What girl *wouldn’t* talk about her fiancée that played such a large role keeping the space station safe?”

John checked under the hood and thought he noticed something wrong with the wiring near the front of the engine block.

“Looks like there might be a problem with the alternator,” he reported. “If you ever take a ride to retrieve the SUV, I’ll go with and check some of the destroyed cars. Maybe we’ll be able to salvage parts among the junk.”

“That’ll be great, I look forward to having some help,” the mechanic said.

Considering everything John went through – whether it was during the last five days or the last five years – it was amazing how working on a car relaxed him, transported him back to the days when he hung out in his garage with Colin, complaining about the jerks they went to school with at the Zwier Academy. Obviously, this garage was different from the last one, the people with him were much different,

his situation in life was *much* different. Still, he thought about his best friend and the seacraft he'd gone to and wondered if there was any chance Colin McKay possibly survived. His initial thought was that *nobody* on Earth could've survived but the people at this compound proved this certainly wasn't the case...

"Come on, John, there's still more to see," Emily finally said once she realized he wasn't going to voluntarily pull himself from the car. Before he followed her, he made sure to point out the wiring problem to the mechanic.

Once the two reemerged on the surface, John was surprised to see the sun in a different position in the sky as when they went into the garage. He smiled and remembered how quickly time could pass when he worked on cars.

"I'm sorry we were down there so long," he said, unable to stifle a yawn. "You should've told me I was taking forever."

"That's okay, it was nice to see you enjoy yourself without looking constantly worried," Emily said. "To be honest with you, I'm glad your biggest problem here will be fixing a car instead of fixing the station. Besides, I'm *not* excited about this next part."

They again crossed the compound and headed into the barn. Many garden workers were seated around a large table in the kitchen, where baskets of fruits and vegetables covered the large table. They were invited to join but despite John's *growling* stomach, Emily politely declined and passed through the room. She led him past the staircase and toward a room in the back where John heard a number of voices, the most distinctive belonging to Pastor Mike. When they entered the room, they saw the pastor and several others sitting at a table of debris, which they fashioned into any weapon they could use. The walls in the room propped up dozens of such weapons, every sort of pointy stick, rusty nail and sharp piece of glass imaginable. It looked like the sort of room where a bloodthirsty warlord might hang out, not a man of God. John quickly understood why Emily hadn't looked forward to this part of the tour.

"I figured you'd make it here eventually," the scarred pastor said. "Of everything we've built at this compound, I can say with

honesty that I'm least proud of what we've done here."

"Then why make all this stuff?" John asked. "Is the world really *that* dangerous?"

John noticed a few others grimace before the pastor answered.

"Unfortunately, I know for a fact that it *is*," Pastor Mike answered. "I've traveled far and wide across post-apocalyptic America and while I ended up here with so many wonderful people, I've seen more than a fair share of lost souls. It's total lawlessness and chaos in many places; plenty are taking advantage of that situation. Trust me, bad people *are* out there; they've come here before and it's only a matter of time before they come back. That's why we need to have men guarding the wall at all times, that's why we need to have weapons ready to defend our people and what we've worked so hard to accomplish here."

"Can it really be *that* bad?" John asked, assuming the pastor and his people were erring on the side of caution.

"Can you gentlemen give us a minute, please?" the pastor asked the other men, who obliged by leaving the room. Once it was just Pastor Mike, John and Emily, the scarred man gestured for them to sit down. "Emily, I would never ask you to fight for us but John, you are a different story. I expect you to be ready to protect Emily if anything bad ever happened."

"Of course, I would," John said. "I'm just having a hard time believing things could be so bad, that's all."

"I know the two of you are new here but I'm going to let you in on some information that my people know," the pastor said. "For those lucky few who hadn't seen anything bad, I let them in on this one piece of information. You see this scarring on my face? Let's just put it this way: I never had a scratch on my face before the strike and I never had a scratch on my face soon *after* the strike. It wasn't until much later – until I ran into some of those very *bad* people – that this happened to me. I don't tell anyone that until I'm certain they aren't capable of doing something like that to another person."

John and Emily recoiled in horror, though neither required specific details about how the pastor's wounds were inflicted.

“We’re so sorry,” Emily whispered. “We didn’t know.”

The pastor’s lips curled into a warm smile, strange for a man crafting weapons of death.

“Work hard and protect those who need to be protected, those are the only two rules we have here. And if the two of you and your friends from the shuttles decide to live here, we’ll have to expand in a big way, which will make us an even bigger target,” the scarred pastor said. “But this is my calling in life – to help good people – and it’s certainly a risk I’m willing to take.”

As the sun began to hang lower in the sky, the weapons room lost some of its light. The pastor reminded them of their big day tomorrow and suggested they rest for now.

“We woke Alexandra earlier and provided her another room so you have yours back,” the pastor said. “You’ll need a good night of sleep for your wedding.”

The mention of their wedding gave both John and Emily butterflies in their stomachs. John felt the need to apologize to the pastor for questioning him but he said nothing as they left the room.

By the time they reached the kitchen, everyone already ate and only a few things were left in the baskets to choose from. Emily wasn’t hungry but John took a few tomatoes as they made their way outside. Though he never liked tomatoes much, it was the first *real* piece of food – one that hadn’t been dried for long-term storage – that he had in years; it tasted as amazing as he expected. John was exhausted and felt his eyes growing heavy even as he stood and watched the sun set over the horizon. The sight was more beautiful now that he had Emily by his side.

“What do you think is out there?” Emily asked. “Outside of these walls?”

“Not much, at least not from what I’ve seen,” John answered. “Alexandra and I saw a few houses that survived but it’s mostly barren land mixed with piles of debris.”

“I’ll admit, I didn’t really see much of the land where *Destinee* landed,” Emily said. “I was pretty out of it; I don’t remember much of what happened.”

“Don’t worry, you didn’t miss much,” John said. “I’m just glad you’re okay now, that I finally found you.”

Emily smiled and leaned against John, using his body as a crutch to keep herself standing. This must’ve made her self-conscious as she quickly leaned on her crutch.

“Do you feel any different about me now that you’ve seen the way I rely on the crutches?” she asked.

John felt bad she even had to ask that question but he was sure pity wasn’t the response Emily looked for.

“Actually, yes, I *do*,” he said honestly. “I love you even more now that I see how tough you are. I was starting to think you were a bit weak when we were in space, now I know not to mess with you.”

Emily’s face shined brighter than the sun and John knew his answer was the correct one. She leaned on him again but not before kissing him.

“I’m not *that* tough,” Emily said as she turned back to the setting sun. “My hands have been killing me, I have blisters all over them.” John took her left hand in his and gently rubbed it, feeling newly-formed bumps all over. “My hands used to be a lot tougher before the comet. You’re right, my hands got weak during the years in space.”

Once the sun finally disappeared, the compound’s two night-watchmen – both well-armed with weaponry they saw the pastor making earlier – exited the barn and told John and Emily to go inside for the night. John didn’t need to be told twice and immediately made his way toward the staircase, not before noticing none of the others milling about.

“Everyone goes to bed early around here,” Emily explained.

Once upstairs, they made their way to the last door at the end of the hallway.

“Are you sure you want to sleep in here tonight?” Emily asked. “It is the last night we’re both single, maybe you want to sleep in separate rooms again?”

She meant this as a joke but John answered in a tone of voice that was totally serious.

“I don’t *ever* want to leave your side again.”

John recalled stories he heard at his bachelor party about how most married men couldn’t sleep the night before their weddings, how their minds raced at the idea of what they were getting themselves into. He did not have that problem. His head barely hit the pillow on the small bed they shared before he fell into the deepest sleep of his life.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

JUNE 26, 2025

FOUR YEARS, TEN MONTHS, FOUR DAYS AFTER IMPACT...

The sun had yet to break the horizon when John was woken by a knock at the door. He opened one eye halfway and saw through the window that the sky barely brightened beyond a dark purple. His sore body felt like it weighed a ton and the last thing he wanted was to get out of bed. His eye closed again and he immediately fell back asleep, though that lasted only a few seconds until the *knocking* – along with girlish laughter – woke him a second time. John hoped that ignoring the people at the door would make them go away but Emily shook his shoulder to get him moving.

“Come on, it’s time to wake up,” she whispered.

“Can’t I sleep another day or two?” he asked tiredly. If the simple effort of talking used more energy than John possessed, he didn’t even want to imagine how much energy he needed to wake up.

“Wake up, love birds!” a familiar voice called out from the hallway. “The sun is going to be up in less than an hour.”

“Then come back in six,” John muttered, though he didn’t say it loud enough for the knockers to hear. Emily shook John’s shoulder again.

“What’s wrong, grumpy?” she asked. “Don’t you want to marry me anymore?”

“Of course I do,” John said. “But I was hoping we could do that in another... I don’t know... six hours or so.”

When Emily shook him this time, there was nothing gentle about it. John hadn’t realized how close he slept to the edge of the small bed until this moment; he lost his balance and fell to the floor.

“Hey, look who’s awake now,” Emily said sweetly, sitting on the edge. “Could you answer the door now?”

John scowled at her playfully but the push was enough to wake him. He scanned the room for his clothes until realizing he already wore everything but his shoes. He passed out the night before without undressing.

“We know you can hear us in there,” the familiar voice said.

John opened the door to find Alexandra – somehow wide-awake despite the early hour – along with a few other women brought to the compound from *Destinee*. Many appeared bubbly and giggly as they forced their way into the room.

“Sorry, John, women only,” Alex said as she guided him out the door. “We’ll see you at the altar.”

“What about my shoes?” he asked.

One of the women picked up John’s sneakers and tossed them to him. He barely caught them before the door was shut in his face. He was more awake now but felt as dazed as when he heard the first knock. John pulled his sneakers on but didn’t know what to do from there. After waiting a few minutes, he knocked on the door and heard the giggling stop inside.

“Yes?” Alexandra asked.

“How long is this going to take?” John wondered.

The door opened just wide enough for Alexandra to stick her head out. John tried to look into the room but she would not let him.

“It’s going to take as long as it takes, don’t rush us,” Alex said bluntly. “Go wait outside, you’re not supposed to see your bride until you’re *just* about to get married.”

Without letting John get in another word, Alexandra closed the door. He stood in place another minute or so before taking Alex’s advice and heading downstairs. He didn’t know where to go or what was going on with the wedding ceremony so he made his way outside, where many compound inhabitants headed toward the garden building, off to begin their daily routines. John felt guilty that he was staying here and not working but the pastor’s appearance distracted him from that.

“Nervous?”

“I guess, I just want the wedding to happen already,” John said. The pastor clasped him on the shoulder.

“I wouldn’t expect them any time *real* soon, especially if the girls are helping her get ready,” the pastor said. “It’s unfortunate we don’t have proper attire for the two of you but I’m sure it’ll still take

them a while to get ready. I'm going to check on the garden, I'll be back in a little bit. Just try to relax."

John watched the scarred pastor join the others headed toward the next building. Those who saw him smiled or offered luck. Though they were probably being friendly, John still felt uneasy and hated standing in place with nothing to do. He considered playing with the children once they came outside but figured it would be worse to play while others worked than to simply stand still. Besides, one of the kids carried an empty basket and led the others toward the garden; they had chores of their own to complete before they could play baseball. Just when John was about to head back to his room and demand Alex and the others hurry up, a familiar face appeared from the barn.

"You're going to be waiting a *long* time," the mechanic said. "It can take a group of women longer to do a bride's hair than it would for me to change a transmission. And I don't even know *how* to change a transmission."

"You're not going to watch us get married?" John asked when he saw the mechanic start to walk off.

"Figured I'd work an hour or two, like everyone else, then check to see if the ceremony started," he answered.

"You think it'll take *that* long?" John asked.

The sun already started to peek above the horizon and John was starting to realize the sunrise wedding was more than likely going to be a well-after-sunrise wedding.

"Have fun waiting," the mechanic called out.

"Wait up!" John yelled, rushing to catch up. "Standing around is driving me crazy. I can help you for a while."

"You sure?" the mechanic asked. "I don't want you to get in trouble if you get dirty."

"Don't worry, I'm sure my tuxedo will be fine," John said, gesturing to his clothes, well short of fancy.

The two headed toward the underground garage, where they started to fiddle with a few cars, especially the luxury sedan with the bad alternator. The mechanic's tool supply was limited, and those he *did* have weren't exactly meant to be used as automotive tools. Still,

they eventually yanked out the alternator. Instead of waiting to search for a replacement among junked cars on the highway – which might not produce anything suitable anyway – John and the mechanic looked under the hoods of other cars, even those that already functioned properly. The mechanic doubted they'd find anything usable for the luxury car but John eventually stumbled upon one that might work.

"It might be tough squeezing it into place but this could work," John said, comparing it to the damaged alternator he held. "It looks like the wire connections are in the same place. Not exactly a perfect replacement but it might do the job."

"It's worth a try, as long as we don't damage the usable car in the process," the mechanic said, though it was clear he wasn't quite so optimistic about their chances.

"You're going to be real impressed when I make this work," John predicted.

The two began to pull out this part but were interrupted by the sound of running footsteps, which echoed in the large garage. When John looked up, he could tell right away he was in trouble.

"Have you been down here this whole time? We've been looking *everywhere* for you," Alexandra said.

"Sorry, I was getting antsy while waiting," John said.

"You're *supposed* to be antsy, you're not supposed to run away from that," she chided. "You're supposed to be waiting for Emily, not the other way around. The entire compound is up there waiting. Now move it!"

Alexandra stormed out of the garage and John and the mechanic followed close behind. Like Alex said, they saw everyone gathered just outside the barn, staring in their direction.

"Uh oh, looks like you're in trouble," the mechanic whispered, smartly disappearing into the crowd once they got closer.

When John spotted Emily near the front with the pastor, he felt guilty that she looked so nervous. He would've preferred she was mad at him. The last thing he wanted was her to question his loyalty, to question whether he wanted to go through with the wedding. But

when she spotted him, he could see relief wash over her and the two smiled at one another. It was at this moment that *he* relaxed, too, and was able to notice how beautiful she looked. Though she still wore the same clothes, her hair was pulled back and worn up in a way John never saw before. A small, homemade veil flowed down her shoulders and when John got closer, he saw that someone apparently had makeup, something he never saw Emily wear. John tried to focus only on her but he couldn't avoid dozens of eyes staring at him. He recognized a few other shuttle people near the front but barely looked at the others before Emily got his attention again.

"You're late," she whispered. She balanced herself on one crutch and wiped at his face with her other hand. "And you have grease on you."

"Sorry."

Pastor Michael O'Connor cleared his voice and silenced the crowd before beginning the ceremony with words of hope.

"This is truly one of the darkest, most difficult moments in the history of humanity, but Emily and John have shown that love can grow at the most unexpected of times," the pastor began. "In fact, I believe love is the world's greatest healer and will ultimately be the reason humankind will move on from the great tragedy brought about by the comet. God clearly has a purpose for all of us during these tough times and I hope finding true love is a purpose not strictly limited to these two young adults. Life will be difficult for us all in this dangerous new world but I hope it will be a little easier for John and Emily now that they will become as one in the eyes of the Lord. I pray that this is the first of many happy wedding ceremonies that I have the privilege of overseeing.

"Now, we will move on to the exchange of wedding vows."

When John turned toward Emily, he already saw her makeup smudging as tears dripped from her eyes. But the pastor's words of love were interrupted by a ringing bell near the front gate, which brought the ceremony to an abrupt halt and a general sense of panic to most in the crowd.

"I'm sorry but you'll have to excuse me," the pastor told the

bride and groom as he ran toward the front gate with many of the compound's men.

"What's happening?" Emily asked.

"I don't know but I'll find out," John said, sensing a security threat. "You wait here."

Although most of the crowd scattered, John spotted the mechanic and rushed over to his new friend.

"What's going on?" he asked worriedly. "What does that bell mean?"

"That's the warning bell," the mechanic said. "The watchmen at the wall ring it whenever they spot possible trouble in the distance. Possible intruders are approaching."

John and the mechanic joined the surge of men rushing toward the wall, where the pastor already gave instructions to a few men to go to the barn's back room and bring enough weapons for them all. The mechanic waved John toward an abandoned ladder, which they climbed to one of many small defensive ledges built into the wall. In the distance, they saw the reason for concern. A long line of cars was headed their way, dozens upon dozens of cars that appeared to be moving at a slow pace.

"I need everyone to gather around," the pastor called out.

John and the mechanic quickly climbed down the ladder and joined the rest of the compound inhabitants circled around Pastor Mike. John's heart pounded and he wondered if he looked as nervous as the others.

"Hopefully these people are passing by but we have to expect the worst," the pastor warned.

As he spoke, three men came back from the barn carrying armfuls of makeshift weapons, which they distributed. John ended up with one of the most primitive weapons – a two-foot long length of wood with nails sticking out the end. He could not imagine using this against another human and prayed this caravan simply continued along the highway without turning off. Once all the men were armed, the rest of the weapons were given to the women, who were ordered to protect the children.

“Now everyone get to battle positions,” the pastor ordered.

The compound inhabitants obviously practiced this drill before. The men immediately dispersed and headed toward different areas of the compound wall. In less than a minute, every ladder was climbed, every wall ledge manned. While John was ready to fight if his life depended on it, his biggest concern at the moment was Emily. She apparently thought the same about him; he saw her hobbling toward him from the barn’s direction. When he reached her, John saw Alexandra rushing after them as well.

“Don’t fight,” Emily said. “Stay with me.”

“I can’t do that,” he said. “If these people are trouble, I need to help protect you.”

“Then I’ll stay with you,” she said. “I’ll fight next to you.”

“You can’t do that, Emily, you have to help me protect the children,” Alex said.

“She’s right,” John said. “Stay near the barn with the other kids and women. Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

“How do you know that?” Emily asked.

“Because if I woke up this early today, *nothing’s* going to stop me from marrying you,” he joked. “I love you so go protect yourself.”

The two kissed before Alexandra dragged Emily toward the barn. For nearly a minute, John looked around in confusion, wondering where to go since the others were already in position. John wished the pastor were nearby so he could tell him where to go. Luckily, the second best option happened to show up.

“Come on, John, come with me,” the mechanic said as he rushed by. Without hesitating, John followed the man, who ran toward the rear of the compound. “Most of the fighters are positioned near the front wall but the pastor likes me near the back, just in case the enemy attempts to attack from behind. In case a battle *does* start and I think things aren’t going our way, it’s my duty to get the bus into position to evacuate the women and children. It’ll be an easier job with two people.”

“That’s a big responsibility,” John said, discovering a newfound respect for the mechanic. “The pastor must really trust you.”

“He *should* trust me,” the mechanic said over his shoulder while they ran in the direction of the garage. “We *are* brothers, after all.”

The revelation shocked John, though he wasn’t sure why. After all, he’d yet to learn how *any* compound inhabitants got here, something he vowed to do if they survived this day. As John ran to the rear of the compound, he looked around the wall’s perimeter and realized how sadly lacking their defenses were. Huge sections of wall remained unoccupied, openly exposed to attack; security was not as good as the pastor made it out to be.

Once John and the mechanic were in place, there was nothing to do but wait and watch as the line of cars came closer. Though the two men were far away from the others, they still felt the anxiety of the entire group; waiting was almost as bad as what might soon happen. But while everyone’s focus was on the possibility of impending disaster, John couldn’t take his eyes away from Emily, who stayed with the kids near the barn.

“Has the compound ever been attacked?” John asked.

“Once,” the mechanic said. “We fought them off but there was nowhere *near* this many people. We’ve heard rumors about small personal armies popping up around the country, though none of us has actually seen one ... at least not yet.”

“I hope this isn’t the first,” John said, stating the obvious.

As John watched the first of the cars turn off the highway and head toward the compound, a part of him wondered if he should rush down to the garage right now, steal a car and speed out of here with Emily before the real danger began...

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Colin asked.

“How many times do I have to answer that?” Marc asked.

“Have you seen other compounds along the way that I could confuse this with?”

The seacraft survivors traveled this highway several days, heading toward the “only good place” Marc found during years of wandering across the new America. He hadn’t expected the trip to the compound to take this long – he constantly doubted his sense of direction – and had felt relieved when they finally spotted the large walled area in the distance.

“And you’re sure it’s safe?” Colin asked. “It doesn’t look like they’ve rolled out the welcome mat for us.”

“Of course they haven’t,” Marc said. “They’re cautious, as well they should be. But don’t worry, they’ll relax when they see me... hopefully.”

Now that the group had enough cars for everyone, the last few days had been the most productive since evacuating the craft. Still, they were slowed by many stops along the way to ditch broken cars or those that ran out of gas, which might’ve been why it took longer to get here than Marc figured. Heather and Real joined Marc and Colin in the lead car, which was where they’d been since the recon cars returned with news of the walled compound just off the main highway. Ben was in the car directly behind along with Earl and Roy Hopkins, whose complaining subsided since Marc described the compound to them. At this moment, Colin was glad he wasn’t in that car with them; he could already imagine Roy’s negativity upon getting his first glance of the place.

“It’s not quite paradise, is it?” Colin asked once they turned off the highway and made their slow approach toward the wall.

“Don’t judge it until you’ve had a better look,” Marc said. “This place might surprise you.”

Colin had trouble picturing how the compound – which seemed to consist of nothing more than open space and a few dilapidated

buildings – could possibly be as nice as Marc described, though the drifter was yet to steer them wrong. As if Ben read Colin’s mind, he pulled next to the lead car after turning onto the dirt road. Marc rolled down his window though a cloud of dust entered their car.

“Are you sure *this* is it?” Ben called out.

“Why doesn’t anyone believe me? I know what I’m talking about.”

“You’re actually listening to this *whacko*?” they heard Roy Hopkins say from the backseat of Ben’s car. “He’s probably leading us into a trap, we shouldn’t trust him.”

Real *growled* beside Heather in the backseat, which he did every time he heard the sound of Roy’s voice. Colin was ashamed to admit a part of him thought the same thing, wondered if Marc’s sanity had broken over the years and he wanted revenge on *everyone* from the seacraft. When Colin’s eyes met those of his friend in the next car, he could tell Ben was thinking the same thing.

“I think we better stop,” Ben said.

“But the compound is only a few hundred yards away, we’ll be at the gate in a minute,” Marc said.

“And that’s why we need to stop *now*,” Ben said, more an order than suggestion.

Colin recognized that his friend was challenging Marc and he expected Ben to cut off the lead car at any moment if Marc didn’t comply. But the drifter eventually eased on the brakes, bringing the parade of cars to a stop well short of the compound.

“There are dozens people positioned atop the wall,” Ben said. “They look like they’re ready to defend themselves so we don’t want to give them the impression we’re here to attack.”

“They’re just skeptical of newcomers, no different than any survivor you’ll meet on Earth now,” Marc reminded him. “But I was personally invited back so I’m sure they’ll calm down once they see me.”

“That’s why only a few of us should approach on foot, make sure there’s no confusion,” Ben said.

“He’s right,” Colin said.

“We should get back to the highway and get as far from this junkyard as possible,” Hopkins added.

Colin’s heart beat quicker as he looked at the compound people along the wall, all appeared armed and dangerous. Marc told them there weren’t many people living at this place but based upon how well guarded it seemed, Colin wondered if the drifter was mistaken. Marc finally put the car in park and opened the door, upon which time Real jumped into the front seat and climbed out the door. But when Marc saw Hopkins getting out of the next car, he gave an order of his own.

“Only me and the two *real* leaders, Ben and Colin,” Marc said. “We’ll let them know our intentions and come back for the rest of you.”

“Sounds good,” Ben said, undoubtedly glad to leave Hopkins behind.

At this moment, Colin would’ve been happy staying behind, too. With Ben and Marc waiting outside for him, he couldn’t very well remain in the car. He quickly turned to Heather, now alone in the backseat.

“Make sure you move to the front. If you sense trouble, don’t try to help, turn the car around and get out of here as quick as you can,” he told her.

Colin could tell Heather wanted to disagree so he got out and closed the door before she could voice her opposition. Three men and the dog slowly made their way forward without saying a word. Marc walked with the indifference of a man out for a leisurely stroll, though Ben and Colin couldn’t keep their eyes off the wall and those who guarded it. Colin was reminded of a medieval castle defended by fierce knights, yet he tried not to think about what those knights did to possible intruders...

Once they reached the front gate, they made first contact with those inside.

“We’re ready to fight so move along if you’re here to cause trouble,” said the man dressed in all black perched near the wall’s gate. Though the compound’s leader was fifteen feet off the ground,

John saw that something was wrong with his face.

“Pastor Mike, it’s me, Marc. I was here about a week ago,” Marc called out to the man in charge. “I’m sorry I couldn’t bring back the car you loaned me but you can have any of these others if you want.”

Real barked, drawing the attention of the pastor.

“I’m glad to see that you and your dog safe,” he said, though he still sounded suspicious. “I didn’t expect to see you again, especially not so soon.”

“You know that... thing... I need to do? It didn’t take quite as long as I expected,” Marc explained. “Since then, I’ve found all these people who just returned to Earth’s surface. They – ”

“Excuse me a moment,” the pastor interrupted. “But we’ve already made contact with the shuttle passengers who returned to Earth. They came from the east but you and your people are coming from the west.”

“We’re not from any shuttle,” Ben interjected.

“Then where *have* you been all these years, young man?”

Neither John nor the mechanic paid attention to the area behind the compound, as they’d given up on being attacked from the rear. Instead, they stared into the distance, watching what happened with the long line of cars. Unfortunately, the new arrivals turned off the highway and drove toward the compound. But they only made it halfway down the dirt road before a pair of cars stopped at the front of the pack, thus stopping everyone behind. After a long minute, three people and a dog emerged from the cars and made their way forward on foot, while the rest of the procession stayed in place.

“You think they’re going to offer a truce?” John asked hopefully.

“I doubt it,” the mechanic said. “If I had to guess, I’d say they’re demanding we turn over the compound or face the consequences. I wouldn’t be surprised if they tried to hurt us even if we *did* comply.”

“Aren’t you the sunny optimist?”

“If you’ve seen the things I have over the years, you might assume the worst, too,” the mechanic said.

John and the mechanic lost sight of the three newcomers once they walked too close to the wall. Based upon the reaction of the other wall protectors – or more precisely, the *lack* of a reaction from the others – John could tell nothing bad had happened. In fact, he assumed that the newcomers were simply talking to Pastor Mike, though he wished he could hear what was being said. After a while, tension turned to boredom despite the mechanic’s best efforts to keep them nervous.

“It can’t be good if it’s taking this long,” Pastor Mike’s brother said. “Friendly talks don’t take this long but *arguments* do.”

Finally, they watched the scarred pastor turn away from the newcomers and speak to some of his nearby people. John and the mechanic spotted the newcomers walking away moments later.

“He’s probably readying the troops for an attack.”

But the reality of the situation couldn’t have been further from the truth. In fact, the men to whom the pastor just spoke were opening the gates as the newcomers waved their group forward.

“He’s letting them in,” John said with a huge sigh of relief. “Your brother is letting them in. There’s obviously not going to be trouble from them.”

“I hope not,” the mechanic said, remaining steadfast in his doubt. “My brother can be a bit too trusting sometimes, even when he shouldn’t. I hope this doesn’t come back to bite him... or all of us.”

Many compound inhabitants climbed down the wall and John saw them gathering around the barn. Emily left the group of children with the pastor, who turned toward the garage and waved for John and the mechanic to rejoin them.

“It appears your reprieve as a single man is short-lived,” the mechanic said.

John nearly leapt off the wall, taking the ladder steps two at a time, almost falling in the process. He did not wait for the mechanic before rushing across the compound. The newcomers continued to

stream through the gate, directed toward the rest of the wedding crowd. The pastor left Emily near the barn and came forward to meet John.

“Are you ready to continue the ceremony?” he asked.

“Of course,” John said. “But who are all of these people? Your brother seems worried about letting them in.”

“My brother worries about everything. Why else do you think we put him near the back whenever there’s trouble?” the pastor asked with a sly smile. “I don’t think we have anything to worry about. The man leading this group – his name is Marc – actually stayed with us a week ago and seemed like a good person. He left us to find these people and help them so he’s worthy of our trust.”

“Help them with what?” John asked.

“They’re on their way to Kansas and need a place to rest for a night or two,” the pastor said. “Marc thinks he wants to join us and a few others might, too. I’m sure it will be hectic around here the next few days but don’t worry, your wedding is still top priority for the moment.”

“Where did they come from?” John asked. The crowd continued to grow larger as more people filtered in through the gates. It quickly became apparent how massive the group of newcomers was, which made John more relieved they weren’t here to fight.

“You’ll have time to speak with the new people later,” the pastor said. “But I’m guessing your bride is getting a little impatient so I think you should rejoin her. I need to check on a few things but I’ll be back to finish your vows in a minute.”

As John walked toward the front of the crowd, he looked back and saw countless more eyes staring at him; the newcomers were being told about the wedding. If John had been nervous before, he was on the verge of being terrified now. The pastor milled about near the front of the group, answering questions from the inhabitants. John couldn’t help but overhear part of the conversation between the pastor and Alexandra.

“They aren’t from the space station so where else could they have been?” Emily’s best friend asked.

The pastor's voice did not carry as well as Alexandra's, but John could have sworn he caught one particular word of the man's answer: seacraft. It took a moment for the implication of this to register in his mind but the pastor moved off before John overheard anything else. John started to walk toward Alex to question her when Emily grabbed his arm.

"Can you believe all of these people?" she asked. "I was so relieved when – is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just thought I heard the pastor say something but my mind *must* be playing tricks on me," he said.

John had once told Emily about the seacraft and his best friend so he didn't want to tell her what he heard for fear she'd find him crazy. Emily took him by the hand and led him to their places near the barn, where they waited for the pastor to return from the gate. The buzz from the crowd grew louder as the last of the newcomers entered.

"I wonder what they're going to do with all those cars," said one of the compound's original inhabitants. "It makes us an even bigger target for trouble that wanders by."

"Don't worry, we have more fighters now."

Not all the chatter was negative, though. John thought he overheard something else that sounded as unlikely as the earlier mention of the seacraft. But just when he was sure he was losing his mind, Emily confirmed that John wasn't hearing things.

"Do you think that could be true?" she whispered to John. "Do you *really* think Heather Sanders could be part of that group?"

John thought of Heather running across the sand from the show *Beach Patrol*, remembered how she was the first female he ever had a crush on. He felt guilty for thinking of her at this moment – as his bride stood right next to him – but he was smart enough to keep quiet about that. Instead, he looked toward the gate and his eyes immediately locked on a woman with long, blond hair; picking out Heather among the crowd was easy. Afraid Emily would catch him staring, he shifted his gaze to the guy standing next to her...

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Heather and Colin were in charge of standing near the open gate, waving their people into the compound and explaining that a wedding ceremony was in progress.

“Make sure you stay quiet while the pastor is talking, we don’t want to be rude,” Heather told their people.

“We’ve come all this way and now we have to wait longer?” Roy Hopkins asked.

“We interrupted the most important day in the lives of two people,” Colin said. “The least we can do is be respectful.”

Hopkins snickered as he walked away with his group but they stayed quiet at the back of the crowd. Once the seacraft survivors were settled into place, the scarred pastor made his way back toward the barn, which looked only slightly nicer up close. Being inside the walls didn’t give Colin a better feeling about the place as a whole. The next building over – the biggest one – looked on the verge of toppling over, as though a firm gust of wind could finish the job started by the comet strike. It didn’t have a roof, which made it useless as far as Colin was concerned.

“At least people here seem friendly,” Colin said. “I know it might not seem like much but there may not be many options for us between here and Kansas. Marc swears it doesn’t get better than this place...”

“We’ll have to wait and see how organized they are,” Heather said. “I guess it *has* to be okay if survivors of the space station ended up here. I’m sure they’ll have interesting stories to tell, especially if President Marshall ends up here.”

The leader of the compound had been forthcoming with information about their inhabitants, telling the seacraft leaders about people they helped from two different shuttles that passed overhead. Colin was amazed that the two aircraft they spotted came from the space station. *What are the chances that people from two of Earth’s biggest refuges against the comet would end up in the same place?* Colin thought. But he was also disappointed by this news. It meant

civilization might not have survived the way they' hoped upon seeing the aircraft.

"Come on, let's get a better view of the wedding," Heather said as she led Colin to the side of the group, where their view of the soon-to-be-married couple wasn't impeded. In the distance, Colin saw the young couple standing in front of the pastor, who quieted the crowd to continue the ceremony. The bride clearly had a problem with her legs because she used crutches to stand. But it was the groom Colin felt strangely drawn to, even though they were far enough that he couldn't see the young man clearly. Maybe Colin simply imagined himself in the groom's position, imagined what it must feel like to make a major commitment to the woman he loved.

Once Colin and Heather found a better spot to watch, he felt a lot of eyes suddenly turning in his direction, a lot of compound people openly staring in his direction, whispering to one another despite the pastor's pleas for silence. At first, Colin wondered if he and Heather somehow intruded upon the wedding by trying to get closer but Heather did not seem to notice the stares.

That's when it hit Colin.

She's used to being stared at, he thought, realizing not a single eye in the crowd looked at him. Colin nearly forgot how famous Heather Sanders once was – apparently *still* was – and how surprised the people here must be to see her. Heather was just another person to those who lived with her for so many years – albeit a *beautiful* normal person – but Colin figured he'd been just as awe-struck the first time he saw her in person, too. Even the groom looked in their direction, yet Colin realized the young man was looking at *him*, not Heather. The groom quickly looked away once the pastor began to speak but continued to glance back at Colin, who couldn't help think there was something familiar about this person who kept looking at him...

"Before our new friends arrived," the pastor began, "I spoke about how frightening and dangerous the world could be, how there's only one thing that will help us survive and thrive in the future."

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“And that one thing is love,” the pastor continued.

Even though Pastor Mike restarted their ceremony, John couldn't stop from looking at the crowd, especially toward Heather Sanders and the guy with her, both of whom circled around and stood to the side, closer than other newcomers. John tried not to look at them more than a few seconds at a time because he didn't want the pastor or Emily to think he was ignoring the ceremony. But the word 'seacraft' kept replaying in his head and he couldn't stop looking at that guy next to Heather. A thought entrenched itself into his mind – as unlikely of it actually being – and John kept wondering if the person next to Heather could be –

“And now for the vows,” the pastor said.

John forced himself to focus on Emily, as she was first to repeat the simple – yet heartfelt – words the pastor whispered to her.

“I, Emily Peterson, take you to be my husband,” she started, her voice already starting to crack as tears slowly trickled from her eyes. John felt guilty that he wanted to look over his shoulder at such an important moment, though he stopped himself from doing so. “I promise to love you in sickness and in health, in good times and bad, in this life and the next, until the end of time.”

“And now, the groom's turn,” the pastor told the crowd before starting to whisper the words to John.

“I, John Fare, take you to be my – ”

“John Fare?!” a voice called out from the side of the crowd.

John didn't know whose *gasp* was louder: the crowd's, Emily's or his own. But while everyone was shocked because of an interruption, John was shocked that he recognized the voice, that his unlikely thoughts were actually true. John immediately turned to face Heather Sanders, who also gawked at the young man standing next to her, just like everyone else. The young man took a few steps forward, giving John an even better view of the person he could now identify.

“Colin McKay!” he called out. John turned to Emily and the pastor, both of their mouths agape. “I'm really sorry but I'll be right back.”

As the two best friends walked toward each other – having not

seen each other for nearly five years – Colin removed the chain with the little jar from around his neck and handed it to John.

“I think this belongs to you,” Colin said.

John looked at the chain and chuckled, having completely forgotten about the relic of the trouble teen he’d once been.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” John said as the two shook hands. “The seacraft really existed?”

“It *did*,” Colin said. “But how did *you*... I mean, where did you... how are *you* here?”

John laughed at his friend’s utter bewilderment. John knew all along that there was a possibility – albeit a very *remote* possibility – that Colin survived the comet strike depending on how sturdy the mysterious seacraft had been. But as far as Colin was concerned, there was *zero* chance of ever seeing his best friend again after leaving for the seacraft years ago. In fact, when John thought about specific events that happened in his life that led him to this moment, even *he* had a hard time believing it.

“Found out some things about my family, hitched a ride to the space station,” John said matter-of-factly. “Been hanging out there ever since, floating in space, making repairs until I stole a shuttle to get back to Earth. No big deal.”

“You were on one of those shuttles?” Colin asked.

“The second one, I was sitting in the copilot’s seat,” John said. “I’m lucky to still be alive, things got a little bumpy.”

“And I thought my five years aboard the seacraft were out of control,” Colin said. “I’m sure you must have *tons* of stories.”

“You have no idea,” John said. He looked around and saw everyone still staring at them. “But we’ll have time to fill each other in later. I’m actually in the middle of something pretty important now.”

Colin had been so focused their conversation – especially the fact that his best friend was still alive – that he hadn’t realized so many people were waiting for them to hurry up.

“I’m sorry,” he said to the crowd before turning to the bride-to-be and repeating his apology. “I’ll just go back here for now.”

Colin turned and started walking back toward his group of

people when John stopped him.

“Don’t go anywhere,” John said. “I want you standing up here with me. I can’t believe I’m actually going to have a best man.”

Colin smiled and put his arm around his friend as they walked toward the front of the barn. John might still be his best friend but the fact that he was about to get married told Colin his friend was much different than when they’d last seen each other.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

JUNE 30, 2025

FOUR YEARS, TEN MONTHS, EIGHT DAYS AFTER IMPACT...

Over the course of the next few days, the original compound inhabitants had the most to get used to; their entire lives were dramatically changed with the arrival of so many new people. But in a true testament to how open and welcoming Pastor Mike's clan was, everything went smoothly and the people worked well together. By the time the Lehigh group were well-rested and well-fed and ready to leave for the final stretch of their long journey home, Pastor Mike and the other compound residents were sad to see them go.

At certain times, John Fare and Colin McKay seemed inseparable during those days following their reunion, spending as much time together as possible, swapping incredible stories of survival. Both young men were through so much since the comet strike – each facing certain death yet beating it time after time –they realized how lucky they were to have survived, let alone defy the odds by finding one another again. It still felt like old times between them, especially when Colin hung out with John in the underground garage, watching his friend work on cars.

But despite the hours Colin hung out with John, he spent *more* time with his other best friend, Ben Coleman. Colin and Heather only needed a single tour of the compound's barn, garden building and underground garage to realize this place was where their future lay, especially once the pastor spoke about plans for expansion. With many seacraft survivors deciding to stay at the compound – not to mention the future arrival of shuttle passengers, expected at any time now – more housing areas were a must. Luckily, the pastor already foresaw a day when his compound would need to accommodate more people so he had plans in mind for what they needed to do.

But Ben would not be here to see any of that, which was why Colin spent a lot of time with him. Their friendship was rocky for a long time and each had moments when they disliked the other person. But knowing their time together was coming to an end helped both

put aside those feelings. In the end, Ben helped save Colin's life by taking him in and Colin proved a worthy friend and ally during Ben's years in charge of the seacraft. In their hearts, the two knew they'd probably never see each other again...

Pastor Mike was more than willing to help Ben's people in any way possible but couldn't do much beyond giving them a place to rest, providing a small quantity of food and allowing them to swap a few cars from the compound's inventory to make sure they got back to Kansas. The compound leader had a few maps of surrounding areas and provided Ben the best routes toward Lehigh, which would hopefully be safe and allow them clear passage. Beyond that, the Lehigh group would have to do the rest themselves, which they seemed more than willing to do.

Ben readied his people on the fourth morning of their stay, thanking the pastor for all of his help. Since there were a few non-Lehigh seacraft survivors who ultimately decided to remain at the compound, the farewells lasted nearly an hour. Finally, the first of a long line of cars began to pull away and continue east. Ben remained behind to coordinate their departure but it wasn't long until it was his turn to climb into the last automobile.

"Good luck," Heather said, offering a hand in truce. Ben looked at her hand with the same disdain he'd shown for years; Colin worried his friend would take this final opportunity to unleash a tirade on her. But Ben's expression softened and he ignored Heather's hand, instead embracing the surprised woman.

"Take care of my friend, he's a good guy," Ben told her.

"I will," she said. "I hope you and your people find what you're looking for."

Since reuniting with John, Colin knew he'd be separating from the other seacraft survivors, separating from Ben. But he still hadn't thought of how to say goodbye, even now that the time had come.

"Thanks for all your help," Ben said. "We never would've made it this far without your help."

As Ben hugged him, there was only one thought on Colin's mind, one thought he blurted out knowing he'd never have this

opportunity.

"I'm so sorry about Kerry," he said, choking back tears. "I'm so sorry I couldn't save her."

Colin was surprised that these words flowed out of him. It had been years since he last apologized to Ben about his sister's death, an apology his friend never seemed ready to accept. In fact, it had been months since the two even mentioned Kerry and based on the tighter squeeze Ben gave him, Colin knew his friend was surprised to hear such an apology. Colin realized this might possibly cause his friend to explode but he'd never be able to forgive himself if he didn't try apologizing one final time.

When Ben pulled away, he had tears in his eyes though he did not appear angry.

"I know it wasn't your fault," Ben said. For once, his eyes were not squinted, his brow not furrowed, his face truly at peace. Ben seemed like he truly forgave Colin, who felt like the world's heaviest burden lifted from his shoulders. "Maybe I'll see you around. Lehigh isn't *that* far away, especially if you don't run into traffic."

With that, Ben got into the final car and drove off, the last in a long line headed toward Kansas.

"Do you really think they're going to find anything there?" Heather asked as they watched the cars disappear into the distance.

"I hope so," Colin said, suddenly feeling guilty about staying behind and not discovering Lehigh's fate with the others. "I *really* hope so."

Heather must've sensed Colin's guilt so she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, giving Colin the reminder he needed about why they stayed at the compound.

"This is the best place for *us*," she told him.

"I know," Colin said.

"And besides, if they reach Lehigh and it's destroyed, they know how to get back," Heather said.

Most others dispersed by this point, headed back toward new jobs, new routines. Heather kissed him on the cheek and walked toward the garden building, where she and Emily were being taught

how to help grow plants. Pastor Mike gave the order to close the gate and when Colin turned around after taking his final glance, he saw John standing a few feet away.

“How long have you been there?” Colin asked.

“Just a few minutes,” John said. “You feel like helping in the garage? Maybe I could teach you a few things since you don’t seem like much of a farmer.”

“Okay.”

The two friends turned and headed toward the garage. As they walked, they saw Heather and Emily heading into the garden. The girls waved.

“You know you still owe me an apology, right?” John asked.

“You mean for interrupting your wedding?” Colin wondered. “I already said sorry ten times.”

“No, not that. You need to apologize for stealing my girl,” John joked. Colin raised an eyebrow, his head turning slightly to the side in confusion. “Don’t pretend like you forgot I had a crush on Heather.”

Colin chuckled.

“But you’re a married man now,” Colin said.

“That’s beside the point,” John laughed. “If it wasn’t for me, you never would’ve seen a single episode of *Beach Patrol*. You were more in love with sports and your favorite baseball player. What was his name? Jerry Walkson?”

“Actually, it was Jeremy *Walker* but he’s not my favorite anymore,” Colin said. “You know that little kid who was with our group and left for Lehigh with the others? That was Walker’s kid.”

“No way, he was on the seacraft, too?” John asked in amazement.

“Unfortunately.”

“What happened to him?”

“Now *that’s* a long story,” Colin said. While the two friends exchanged many tales the last few days, the one involving Jeremy Walker had not yet come up. “Actually, you and him had something in common.”

“What’s that?” John asked.

“You both had a thing for Heather,” Colin said. “But Walker couldn’t control himself.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

During the next few days, the seacraft survivors-turned-permanent compound residents grew accustomed to new living arrangements, as did those at the compound for months and years. The original inhabitants' lives were radically altered as their numbers nearly doubled overnight, much different from the few drifters who trickled in over the years. While the potential workforce multiplied by two, the amount of space was cut in half; rooms were very tight in the barn. People slept wherever they could – many resorted to empty spots on the floor – and some even took shifts, sleeping during the day when others were working. Food and water were scarce and it quickly became apparent that the need for resources would soon outweigh their supplies, especially once passengers from the two shuttles arrived.

“Expansion,” Pastor Mike explained to the crowd he gathered together. “And we have to start with essentials – food and water – before we move on to comforts – more space to sleep.”

The easiest problem to deal with in the short-term was water. Approximately one mile away was a river that was the compound's water source since the pastor and his brother first arrived. Every few days, an armed group of the compound's strongest men hiked to the river and gathered what they needed. Any mission that involved leaving was viewed as dangerous but at least sending more people to get water solved that shortage for the moment, though the pastor already had an idea for a longer-term solution.

“We dig a small river off the main one and lead it straight into the compound,” the scarred man said. “I know it will be a massive undertaking but it won't have to be large to be effective. Then we'll never have to worry about leaving the compound to get water again.”

Food and housing were different stories. Both required the construction of new buildings, which meant they needed more wood and debris to start building. Since the compound inhabitants already picked the surrounding few miles clean, supply-gathering parties needed to venture farther away. With so many people already having

such important jobs at the compound, John and Colin volunteered to search for usable construction material. Obviously, Emily and Heather banded together in an effort to stop them from leaving but the pastor accepted their offer to go, which set their mission in stone.

The mechanic accompanied them and brought along gasoline, which he used to fill the SUV that John and Alexandra abandoned on the highway. But soon, it was just Colin and John in the battered pickup truck. They drove for miles, stopping to investigate every pile of debris along the way. The work wasn't fun but the two friends enjoyed one another's company, continuing to regale each other with stories of their times spent aboard the space station and seacraft. Though it seemed like they talked non-stop for hours, neither came close to running out of stories. It took nearly an entire day to fill the pickup's large bed with viable building materials though neither was in much rush to get back. The young men missed Heather and Emily and didn't want them to worry but they weren't sure how many opportunities they'd get to leave the compound and enjoy the open road, which had been devoid of danger so far.

After a sleepless night of searching for debris with the use of headlights, John finally turned back. Despite the truck's age and poor condition, John could not pass up the chance to push the gas pedal to the floor and enjoy the open highway. A large amount of debris flew out of the cab as John sped along, which cost them plenty of time stopping to retrieve it, but that didn't dissuade John from driving fast. He imagined how sweet it would be to drive these roads in his old Mustang but knew that wasn't something he'd ever enjoy again.

"Marc said he had to abandon your car somewhere in Memphis," Colin told him. "But at least it survived the comet strike."

"Not that I'll ever see her again," John sighed.

When they finally reached the compound, they *did* see quite a few cars parked outside the wall.

"Those aren't ours," John said worriedly once he got a better view of the dozen or so cars.

"Could Ben be back? Or *some* of his people?" Colin wondered.

"I don't think so, none of those cars look familiar," John said.

“Plus, they look too new.”

As they drove closer, Colin spotted several of the compound’s fighters perched in defensive positions atop the wall, a sign that these visitors hadn’t been invited. Just as they started to worry about what happened, John saw the compound’s gate open and there were people milling about inside.

“They’re not fighting,” he said. “That’s for sure. Something else is happening.”

John drove around the new cars and passed through the open gate, where he spotted an even larger group gathered outside the barn. The scene was reminiscent of the wedding a few days earlier, though instead of Colin recognizing the bulk of the people among the group, it was John who knew these people. As if there were any doubts in his mind, he spotted Emily talking to a familiar woman.

“That’s Lily,” he said excitedly, slamming on the brakes as the truck slid to a stop, much of its contents spilling out the back. “I can’t believe she made it here so soon. Come on, you have to meet her.”

John recognized many faces as he jogged past the group of newcomers. Professor Fratanoro tried to wave him down but he pretended not to see the older man; John was far more interested in speaking to Lily and Emily.

“I’m sorry I missed your wedding,” Lily said. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t wait an extra few days for everyone else to arrive.”

“How did you get here so fast?” he asked.

“Logan Franklin,” Lily said. “He found our shuttle the day after you left and eventually brought us back to *Destinee*. Apparently, we only missed you by a couple days. The group rested a few days with the first evacuees but since there was already enough help digging the runways, we headed off to find the compound. Franklin wasn’t happy to hear about you and Alexandra coming here but I see you made the right decision after all.”

“Did you ever doubt I’d make the right move?” John asked sheepishly.

“You? Do anything wrong? No, never,” Lily said sarcastically.

“But I’ll give you credit for one thing: you *did* marry a great girl, one you *definitely* don’t deserve.”

Emily smiled and nodded.

“What took you two so long to get back? Heather and I were worried, especially once we saw the line of cars coming,” Emily said.

Before John could explain the reason for their delay, Pastor Mike arrived and congratulated John and Colin on a job well done.

“The supplies couldn’t have come at a better time,” the scarred man said. “As you can see, we’re growing faster than expected. And we only have a precious few months until your last shuttle arrives. We must be ready for an even greater influx of people, even if it means life will be harder.”

From across the compound, Marc stood with Real, amazed by the transformation this place went through in such a short period of time. It was only a few weeks since he first stumbled upon the walled compound and found the few comet survivors living a simple life. Now, their numbers more than tripled with many more to come, plans in effect to expand this community. Marc saw his fair share of destruction during his years crossing the country and hoped there were others places – other growing, civilized communities – somewhere in America.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

More than four-hundred miles away, the long line of cars continued to cruise at a rate of nearly thirty miles per hour, not stopping for several hours. Without the benefit of signs – almost all of which were destroyed or melted – it was difficult for Ben to gauge how much longer they had to drive. But he had the feeling they were getting close, that they were in the homestretch of their journey. He was pretty sure they passed into Kansas two days earlier, as the empty countryside in these parts wasn't all that different from how the landscape looked before the comet strike – wide open farmland and miles without people around. All Ben needed to see was the occasional tractor plowing fields and he would've felt right at home.

Plenty of debris was still scattered about – like everywhere else they'd been – but temperatures this far north weren't quite as cold as everyone feared. In fact, crops in many surrounding fields seemed to have recovered and grew wildly, making their prospects of a steady food supply better than Ben could have hoped. The Colemans were never big into farming but there were plenty of other seacraft survivors with farming knowledge who were more than willing to teach the rest of them.

Apparently, Ben wasn't the only one who thought they were getting close to Lehigh. Dozens of cars began to break single-file rank and drive next to one another, yelling excitedly to one another through open windows. Ben tried to keep the group calm and steady during the long journey but he no longer bothered; he just felt lucky nobody tried to speed off. Though they encountered no danger during their trip – smartly avoiding bigger cities along the way – Ben was still wary of rushing into anything, wary of taking unnecessary risks now that they were so close to the end.

In the distance, he spotted a car parked at the side of the road and quickly recognized it as the lead reconnaissance car. He assumed the car had broken down or run out of gas – as had quite a few cars since leaving the compound – and knew a few more cars would now be overflowing with passengers. But when he noticed the line of cars

ahead of him were stopping and people were getting out, Ben realized something else was going on. He rushed toward the front of the pack and came to a stop near the recon car, where a few dozen people were crowded around a highway sign that somehow remained standing.

“Is something wrong?” Ben asked the group.

“Look what we found,” said the lead recon driver.

The sign was large – nearly ten feet wide – and very crooked; Ben had no idea how it hadn’t fallen over. Its face was charred black, though the lead recon driver and his navigator worked vigorously to scrub away black soot. A few letters began to appear from underneath but not enough for Ben or the crowd to recognize what it said.

“Okay, so you found a sign,” Ben said. “I don’t understand why you needed to stop for this.”

“Because I know what it is,” said the lead car’s navigator. “I used to go fishing out here with my daddy every weekend, I been driving past this sign since I was a kid.”

“So what does it say?” Ben asked.

The two young men scrubbed harder and soon cleared enough black mess for the crowd to read: WELCOME TO MARION COUNTY. A cheer erupted from the crowd and Ben felt a rush of excitement knowing they reached the outskirts of their county. He suddenly recalled this sign as well and knew they weren’t much farther away.

“Okay, this is great news but let’s try to stay under control,” Ben told the group once they quieted. “We don’t have much more than an hour of driving so let’s make sure we stay safe and together. Let’s get moving.”

Everyone rushed to their respective cars and Ben took the lead, he no longer felt the need for a recon car. Though the roads weren’t labeled, everyone knew where to get off the highway and start heading through Marion County. Surprisingly, smaller back-roads were largely intact, suffering less damage than the major highways they traveled. It only took forty minutes before spotting the first landmark outside town limits. The sign welcoming travelers to Lehigh was nowhere to be seen but the huge nearby oak tree remained firmly in the ground, even if half of it was charred and leafless.

“If the tree survived, maybe some of our houses did, too,” one of Ben’s optimistic passengers said. “Maybe our families are already back from the underground ark.”

Though none of the seacraft survivors knew if their families survived, the possibility of reuniting with mothers and fathers was the reason everyone was so excited. Everyone *except* Ben. His heart pounded in his chest and his palms were sweaty at the idea of finding his father in their house, waiting for *both* of his children to arrive. Ben would have to explain what happened to Kerry, explain that he failed his father’s single order for Ben to protect his sister. Ben still remembered when his mother died and how distraught his father was by the loss. There was little doubt in his mind that his father would be more heartbroken by the loss of his little girl, which gave Ben a sickened feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was potentially minutes from the moment he’d been dreading for years and wanted nothing more than to pull a quick U-turn and speed away from Lehigh so he’d never have to face the mayor again.

He deserves to hear the truth from me, Ben knew. He might hate me now – he might not ever truly forgive me – but it would be worse if I ran and didn’t face him like a man. The only path to possible forgiveness would be rocky but his father – if still alive – was the only family Ben had left.

They barely passed the large oak tree and entered Lehigh before spotting the first sign of a miracle. When Ben drove over the crest of the first hill, he barely had time to check the town’s first building before a car suddenly zoomed past, its driver *honking* in excitement. Ben glanced over and saw its driver pointing excitedly at the nearby farmhouse, which appeared intact.

“The Howard’s farm is still up,” Ben’s optimistic passenger said. “And look! It looks like the Jenkins’ barn is standing, too!”

Ben indeed saw another barn in the distance. Unsurprisingly, a second car zoomed by Ben, who caught a quick glance of Ryan Jenkins behind the wheel. Geoff Howard got out of the first car and started to run down the long dirt driveway toward his house. Ben knew he’d been lucky to keep the group together up to this point but

realized he wasn't likely to keep that control any longer. Ben slammed on the brakes and *honked* his horn to get Howard's attention.

"What are you doing?" the girl in the passenger seat asked. "We want to find out if our houses are still there, too."

"Go ahead, check on your homes," Ben said as he climbed out of the driver's door. "But I want everyone to meet at the high school in two hours to discuss what we find. We can figure out where the newcomers to Lehigh are going to stay."

"What if the high school isn't there anymore?" the girl asked as she climbed behind the wheel.

"It *will* be there, don't worry," said the optimistic passenger in the backseat. "The high school is where our adventure began and that's where it'll end."

Ben recalled the crowded meeting at the high school auditorium years earlier where James Armour and Admiral Matthews told citizens of Lehigh about the comet. Miraculously, the Lehigh citizens were chosen to live in two arks and the fact that their town seemed to survive showed that the miracles were continuing for them.

"If the high school didn't survive, we'll meet on the football field," Ben said.

Ben's car took off and he called out the plan to Geoff Howard before stopping every subsequent car in the long line. Ben pleaded with everyone to remain cautious but doubted they listened as they sped off. Within minutes, the last car disappeared in the distance and he was alone on the empty Lehigh road. His house was only a mile from here so he began to walk, his mind racing quicker during this last mile than it had for hundreds before.

Along the way, he found even more houses and farms still standing. The town wasn't totally devoid of damage; there was still plenty of debris scattered about, plenty of charred or knocked-over trees, plenty of broken windows and missing roofs. But he didn't find a single Lehigh building that didn't appear salvageable. The fact that no homes appeared to have been fixed in any way made Ben assume the older Lehigh residents had yet to return. This came as a bit of a relief, though he felt ashamed for feeling this way about something

that would sadden everyone else. Still, by the time he reached the start of his long, dirt driveway, he couldn't help but feel nervous about what – or who – he might find inside his house.

Everywhere he looked reminded him of Kerry, reminded him of growing up here with her. He was glad to see his house still standing though he immediately noticed not all was the same as he left. Acres of grass grew nearly as high as his waist, which would've been a nightmare to cut with their old-fashioned push mower. Their mailbox was nowhere to be seen and while the big tree next to the driveway remained standing, the rope holding the tire-swing had burned off. The tire lay among the weeds on the ground but the rubber had melted into a distorted mess. Upon closer inspection of his house, Ben found all windows blown out and plenty of chips and dents on the house's exterior, undoubtedly caused by flying debris. He walked past the front door and went to the end of the porch. On the side, a small tree had been knocked over and pinned against the house. It didn't look like anyone had tried moving it, which Ben hoped meant that what lay beneath hadn't been disturbed.

When Ben tried opening the front door, he found it stuck. He pushed harder but eventually succeeded in knocking the door off its hinges. He cursed under his breath and leaned the door against the frame before taking his first step inside.

"Hello?" he called out.

He waited nearly a minute for an answer – for *any* sort of noise – yet heard nothing. Ben slowly walked into the first few rooms and saw that except for a huge mess, his house didn't look too different from the last time he'd been inside. Furniture remained in the same spot, pictures still adorned the walls – at least those that hadn't crashed to the floor – and his father's coat still hung on the rack inside the front door. Still, the house needed a lot of cleaning to be livable again. A strong musty odor permeated from endless rainwater that poured in through the broken windows; there was so much glass on the floor that he couldn't take a single step without hearing a *crunch* underfoot.

It wasn't until he reached the kitchen that a chill ran down his

spine. Empty, open drawers and missing food proved that *someone* had been in the house at some point. Although he doubted an intruder was still present, he grabbed a knife from the nearby drawer. The thought of someone breaking in angered Ben at first but they hadn't been destructive so he couldn't fault people for doing what they needed to survive.

Kerry's bedroom door was closed and Ben walked by it once he climbed the stairs to the second floor. It felt sacrilegious to disturb her room, especially since the door was closed, the only bedroom door on the second floor that wasn't wide open. His room had obviously been raided of clothing but not everything was taken; his Lehigh High baseball jacket still hung in his closet along with other clothes. When he approached his parents' room, he still felt nervous that he could find his father asleep in bed. But that room was just as empty and thieves took much of his father's wardrobe as well. Thankfully, the family picture still sat on the nightstand next to his father's bed, though Ben had trouble looking at his sister's smiling face without feeling tears well up behind his eyes. He opened the drawer to the nightstand and grabbed the keys before taking off out of the house.

Once outside, Ben felt like he could finally breathe again; getting used to living in the house without his family would be a long and painful process. He made his way to the side of the house and worked on moving the downed tree. Since the tree's trunk hadn't split completely, Ben knew it would take serious work to clear it away so he concentrated on digging through the tree's uppermost branches nearest the house. He finally cleared a path to reveal a large metal door, which had its lock still in place. His father always used to talk about how other townspeople would make fun of him for building a tornado shelter so Ben was sure his dad would have the last laugh if he ever came back to Lehigh. He used the keys to remove the lock and pulled open the door, which *squealed* loudly in protest.

A flashlight used to be on the top step but was nowhere to be seen, having likely fallen down the stairs during the earth's shaking. Ben found it at the bottom and clicked it on to find the room still intact. More importantly, he found the room full of supplies still in

place, which solved his food problems for now. Though he hadn't eaten much since evacuating the seacraft, Ben wasn't hungry and left the food in place. Even though the seacraft survivors were home, Ben still considered himself their leader and knew he'd need to take an inventory of the entire town's food situation before indulging in his supplies.

After locking up the cellar, Ben still had time to kill before making his way in town to the high school. Though he knew he'd have to spend time inside his house eventually, he put it off as long as possible. Instead, he started on the *long* list of cleaning he needed to do by grabbing a broom from the kitchen and going to the porch, where he began to sweep away glass and piles of long-dead leaves. He looked across his front yard at the next house over and though it was more than a hundred yards away, he saw the outline of a person standing on that porch as well. Ben waved to his neighbor, much as his father used to do. The thought of his father suddenly turned Ben's attention back to the road. He couldn't help but wonder when – or if – the rest of the Lehigh townspeople – including his father – would ever be back...

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

DECEMBER 18, 2025

FIVE YEARS, THREE MONTHS, TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS AFTER
IMPACT...

President George Marshall was by no means a pilot of any sort, yet he ended up in the copilot's seat of the last shuttle to leave the space station. There was only one pilot aboard so the spacecraft – and all those aboard – would not survive if the pilot became injured, regardless of who sat next to him. With the president's wife, Peter Mansfield and his family, and the rest of the station's passengers securely buckled into the back of the shuttle, it was just about time to leave.

“Okay, that's the last pre-flight safety check,” the pilot said. “It looks like we're clear for detachment, sir. Would you like to do the honors of releasing the latch?”

The pilot pointed to a red button in the middle of the console. Marshall knew this was about the only contribution he could make so he leaned forward and pushed the button. A quick *hiss* was followed by a slight jerking sensation as the final shuttle began to slowly drift from the station.

“Shuttle detached,” the pilot reported. “It'll take just a few minutes until we move far enough from the station to safely fire the engines.”

The president watched the shuttle drift farther and farther away. The pilot slowly turned to get them in the right position and it wasn't long until Marshall took his final look at the space station...

It was exactly six months ago that *Destinee* was the first spacecraft to evacuate and return to Earth. Obviously, Lily, John Fare and the Russians made sure the president's plans went awry and the next two shuttles left within days of the ISU craft. But Marshall and Mansfield adhered strictly to their schedule and departed on the exact day they planned. The last six months aboard the space station reminded the president of the first days he spent aboard when there were few people aboard and not much to do.

Not much to do except worry, that is. With all of the construction workers leaving on earlier shuttles, there was nobody aboard capable of making repairs to the exterior in case something bad happened. Therefore, the president always worried about the station's well-being, especially since Mansfield constantly panicked every time the systems showed the slightest inconsistency. As a precaution, Marshall reassigned the station's remaining population to pods closest to the last shuttle hours after Lily's shuttle left, just in case they had to suddenly evacuate. Luckily, the six months passed without major incident and by the time they were ready to leave, the station's systems were running the best they ever had during the president's years in space. Final evacuation went as smoothly as hoped to Mansfield's relief; he couldn't wait to return to Earth to brag to Lily about how well his plan went.

A part of Marshall was sad to see the space station go. It was the end of a chapter in his life years in the making; years of planning and hard work and secrecy were finally coming to an end. But at the same time, he felt overwhelming relief upon leaving the station, the massive weight of worrisome burden lifted from his shoulders. The president knew he only lied and deceived because it *needed* to be done to keep his people safe, but he still looked forward to returning to Earth and becoming just a regular guy instead of the leader of the survivors.

If *we survive the return trip*, he thought as the planet loomed larger outside the shuttle's cockpit window.

Having lost contact with *Destinee* and both shuttles soon after the spacecraft entered Earth's atmosphere, the final space station passengers could only hope the others landed safely. The president was certain everyone aboard was tense and ready for the worst but they'd still proceed toward the targeted landing zone and pray that *Destinee* and the other passengers had survived to build them a usable landing strip.

"Firing boosters now, sir," the pilot said. "It's time for the exciting part."

Despite the years he spent in space, this was only the second

time Marshall ever flew in a shuttle. As the spacecraft picked up speed racing toward the atmosphere, g-forces pushed the president back in his seat; the simple act of breathing required a strenuous effort. Marshall had no idea how a shuttle pilot could work in such conditions and was glad this would be the *last* space flight he'd ever take. An orange glow appeared outside the window and the ride became very bumpy as they entered Earth.

"We made it, we're back in the atmosphere," the pilot said. "I'll start easing back the shuttle's boosters."

Earlier, the pilot explained that they'd gradually slow the shuttle once within the atmosphere but the slowdown was so gradual he barely noticed it. The president tried to focus his attention below them as the shuttle raced over the Pacific Ocean. In the distance, he spotted the first hint of coastline but when he looked at the water beneath them, Marshall thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He blinked hard and took a deep breath to make sure a lack of oxygen wasn't making him see things. But when he looked out the window again, he spotted even more areas of land seemingly popping out of the ocean, some of that land containing buildings and other signs that life once lived there. Marshall never saw so many islands in such a condensed area, *certainly* not just off the western coast of the United States.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Marshall called out to the pilot, becoming short of breath from the effort of talking.

The pilot pressed a few buttons on the console and seemed pleased by what the systems read.

"Yes, sir, we're right on track for the target zone," he said. "I have visual confirmation of the coastline ahead."

"What about the islands below us?" the president asked. "America doesn't *have* that many islands off California."

The pilot looked at the dozens of land masses below before turning his attention to the tracking system on his console.

"Those aren't *islands* off of California," the pilot finally called out. "That is California below us. According to the system, we should've flown over the coast of California a minute ago. The entire

West Coast is still underwater but it looks like the waters are starting to recede in certain areas.”

The president recalled seeing geographical changes to America while in space – the most obvious being the submersion of the entire state of Florida – but nobody noticed such a significant portion of California inundated. Having a much closer view of the land gave Marshall a better appreciation for the breadth of destruction the comet caused. And if Marshall witnessed this level of damage over water, he felt more worried about what he’d find over land. He didn’t have long to think about that though; the shuttle soon crossed over the coastline.

“*Please* tell me we’re in the wrong place,” the president said a minute later.

Marshall saw no cities or towns below, no hint that this land once belonged to the most powerful nation in the world. For several minutes, they flew in relative silence. Marshall did not want to distract the pilot now that they were getting closer to the landing zone. Besides, the empty, barren landscape didn’t provide much in the way of talking points. The pilot gradually decreased the shuttle’s speed and Marshall could breathe easy again, as if on a regular airplane flight.

“We should be approaching the landing site in less than a minute,” the pilot said. “Now is when I need your help spotting the landing strip... *if* they built one.”

As the shuttle started to descend from the sky, Marshall kept his eyes peeled for any sign of the landing zone. He was able to spot a spiderweb of roads on the ground and large piles of debris and rubble showed the smallest sign of former human existence. But before the president or pilot found *Destinee’s* final touch-down site, a loud *beeping* blared within the cockpit, a red flashing light blinked continuously.

“What is that?” Marshall yelled.

“We’re almost out of fuel,” the pilot called back. “We only have a minute until we’re out. If we don’t find the landing strip in the next thirty seconds, we’ll have to find another place to set down.”

“How close are we to *Destinee*?” Marshall asked.

“According to the computers, we’re already over the target zone,” the pilot said. “If we don’t find them soon – and I mean *really* soon – we’ll have to assume that *Destinee* didn’t make it.”

Time seemed to pass even faster and the president’s concern grew as he feared that they’d have to set down elsewhere. But just before the pilot was about to choose an alternate landing location, Marshall spotted something in the distance.

“There!” he yelled, pointing to an area north of them.

“That better be it,” the pilot said, banking the shuttle in that direction. Once he straightened the shuttle and aimed toward the landing site, he pushed another button on the console. “Firing final reverse boosters now.”

The shuttle suddenly slowed much more suddenly; they lost so much altitude that they’d soon land one way or another. Luckily, Marshall and the pilot clearly saw a large, dug-out section of land that could’ve only been made by human hands. As they got closer and lower, they also spotted a long line of cars parked nearby, as well as the wreckage of *Destinee*. Seeing the damaged spacecraft wasn’t exactly the best sight before one was about to land but *Destinee*’s passengers obviously survived without the runway so Marshall was as confident as he could be just before setting down...

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“You’ve got to hand it to Mansfield, he sticks to a schedule when he sets one,” Lily said, eliciting a few chuckles from those who’d known Peter Mansfield. “That’s about the *only* good thing I can say about him.”

“Come now, I have trouble believing this man can be as bad as you say,” Pastor Mike said.

“Actually Pastor Mike, Mansfield might surprise you by how big of a pain in the... neck he can be,” Logan Franklin added.

John, Colin and a few of the other compound people stood along the line of cars with Lily, Logan and the scarred pastor. The December air was brisk but cooler temperatures were something they’d all grown accustomed to the last few months. Tons of work still

needed to be done at the compound and they didn't have the luxury of staying inside during winter months. In fact, a few got so used to chilly air that they hadn't even bothered to turn on heaters in their respective vehicles during the drive from the compound to the runway. The group arrived the day before, not totally sure which day the final shuttle was supposed to arrive. It was a long day and night of waiting and they started to fear the worst, that something bad happened in space during the last six months or that the shuttle ran out of fuel before entering Earth's atmosphere. But having driven so many vehicles and used so much gasoline to reach here, the compound group knew they had to give the shuttle plenty of time to show up before scrapping their mission.

They'd all been relieved when Lily spotted the streak in the sky, though that relief quickly turned to worry during the shuttle's final descent. The most nervous among the group was Franklin, who continued to voice the same concern over and over.

"I hope we did a good enough job on the runway," he said for the hundredth time since returning to the *Destinee* landing site and manmade runway. "Should we have spent more time on it?"

After the Australian returned to *Destinee* after finding survivors from John's shuttle, he led a group of one-hundred-plus workers tasked with building the runway. The work mainly consisted of flattening and leveling a long stretch of ground using primitive tools. The work was grueling – especially while re-acclimating to gravity – but the large group of workers completed the task in a little over two months. At the time, Franklin considered making the runway longer or wider but based upon the amount of room *Destinee* needed to land, he finally called a halt to the work just after the second month. Since nearly four months remained until the arrival of the final shuttle, the Australian gave the order for all workers to head for the compound where the rest of their people went.

"I guess we're about to find out if your work paid off," John said as the shuttle made its approach.

The huge spacecraft touched down at the beginning of the runway, where it skipped off the surface just once before finally

setting down for good. It was a much smoother landing than *Destinee* or Lily's shuttle had; the flatter surface truly helped the wheels to stick to the ground. With the exception of a few bumps along the way, the shuttle rolled straight before coming to a complete stop at the end of the landing strip. The landing process went perfectly, a huge relief to those watching – and probably an even *bigger* relief to those inside of it. The group stayed by the cars for several minutes until they heard the roaring sound of the shuttle's engine die down.

“Congratulations, Logan,” Pastor Mike said. “It appears all your hard work paid off.”

“I told you your runway was good enough,” Lily told the Australian, who smiled in relief.

“Actually, considering what all of us went through to land, it doesn't seem fair they got off that easy,” John joked. “No skipping off the surface, no barrel rolls, no destroyed spacecraft, none of the fun stuff we experienced. I hate to say but it looks like Mansfield had the right idea with this runway thing.”

“You might be right but if you give Mansfield the satisfaction of knowing that, you'd better run far, far away from me,” Lily teased.

“What do we do now?” Colin asked.

“We wait a little longer,” Logan answered. “The shuttle has to cool down and one of the passengers has to open the door from inside. It's going to take their bodies a while to get used to gravity again, build up enough strength to get out of their seats and reach the door.”

The few compound people who'd never flown in a shuttle began to worry after ten minutes passed and there was no sign of anyone inside. Lily and Logan assured them it was normal. To ready themselves to help, the group got into their cars and drove down the long runway. Soon after parking behind the shuttle, the craft's hatch finally opened and the escape chute appeared.

“It's time to help get people and supplies unloaded,” Franklin said.

“I can tell you one thing, I'm not helping Mansfield with *anything*,” Lily said.

“Me neither,” John agreed.

Pastor Mike assumed the two were just joking. But when he looked at their faces, he saw their expressions were deadly serious.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Having found a dozen nails among a pile of debris in the middle of the Howards's farm, Ben was finally able to finish winter-proofing his house, despite cold temperatures settling over Kansas months earlier. Construction supplies were rare and mainly consisted of whatever could be salvaged from random debris that littered Lehigh. Ben would've loved to find new windows to replace broken ones at his house, but intact windows were in small supply yet large demand among the townspeople. One of the seacraft survivors found several rolls of screen covering – used in screen doors – and gave Ben a roll of it, which worked great over the broken windows in nicer weather. But since it got colder, screens did little to keep out the elements so Ben was reduced to nailing wooden boards over the window frames. His house looked abandoned now that it was boarded up but Ben gladly sacrificed appearance for warmth.

On top of the colder temperatures, a steady wind swirled and was especially strong on the roof, where Ben only had a few windows to cover. He was careful with every step he took; it was a long way down if he fell and nobody was around to help if he got hurt. Once finished nailing scrap wood over the window to his father's room, he only had four nails and one wooden board left. Across the roof, Ben stared at the final broken window, the one to his sister's room. Since her bedroom door remained closed since the day he returned, Ben figured he could leave her window uncovered and it shouldn't affect the temperature in the house too much. But he felt guilty somehow letting cold into her room so he grabbed his supplies and walked over to it. Ben wasn't ready to go into her room – or even *look* into it for that matter – so he focused on working instead of looking through the window. He couldn't totally avoid seeing inside – at least a bit through his peripheral vision – so he worked quicker, rushing to place the board over the window. Ben rushed so much that he didn't notice the small patch of ice by his feet until it was too late.

The moment he slipped on the ice he began to slide uncontrollably toward the roof's edge. He desperately tried to grasp at

anything to slow down but there was nothing to grab hold of, nothing to stop momentum from carrying him toward the edge. In those few seconds, he imagined his broken and bloodied body sprawled on the ground below and wondered how long it would take for someone to discover him. As he reached the edge, Ben felt his legs bang into something hard, which slowed him just enough to come to a stop with half his body still on the roof. His hammer slid down the roof's slope and whacked him on the shoulder before falling off. Once properly balanced hanging halfway off the roof, he glanced over his shoulder and saw that the object he smashed into – the one that stopped him from falling and prevented serious bodily harm – was the ladder. Very slowly, Ben threw his leg onto the roof and pulled himself up. He sat there for several minutes, calming his pounding heart as he realized he barely averted disaster.

Once relaxed, he looked at the ladder on the ground twenty-five feet below and wondered how he would get down. He carefully walked the edge of the roof, looking for any possible escape route but finding no way down. He occasionally glanced at his sister's window – partially covered since he only nailed in one side of the wooden board – but refused it as an entry point until he exhausted every other possibility. Unfortunately, those possibilities were limited. Since his hammer also fell, Ben was unable to gain access to other covered windows, which he nailed so tightly shut that he couldn't pull the wood free by hand. He proceeded to sit at the front of the roof, praying to spot his neighbor outside.

For nearly an hour, Ben sat on the cold roof and waited for *anyone* who might be nearby. But frigid temperatures forced everyone indoors and he knew it was unlikely that anyone would suddenly show up.

Just use her room, he told himself once he started to shiver. The cold didn't usually bother Ben when he was working outside but sitting idly – especially with the extra wind on the roof – made conditions unbearable. He was already so cold that he knew it would take hours in front of the fire before he'd thaw out. *Just don't look at anything in her room and pass right through.*

Now that he made up his mind, Ben rushed across the roof to Kerry's window, pushing the wooden board to the side to give himself access. He took a final glance at his neighbor's house – nobody had since shown up – before climbing through the broken window. Ben was careful not to cut himself on broken glass but once he inside, he rushed toward the door. Since most of the light was blocked out, Ben barely saw anything and almost made it out before his eyes disobeyed his brain. A beam of light shined directly on a picture frame on the edge of Kerry's desk. Though he probably saw the picture of him and his younger sister as babies hundreds of times during his life, it was the first time he laid eyes on it in years. The image brought him to a screeching halt inches from the door to the hallway. He paused long enough to notice the floor covered in dead leaves that blew in from outside. Ben started toward the hallway again but suddenly felt guilty about leaving the room a mess. Kerry was always a bit of a clean freak – she had to be living with two messy men – and would've hated her room so dirty.

Ben started off picking up the leaves but then worked on clearing broken glass, too. Every minute he stayed in her room, he felt better about being there, less guilty than expected. Her room was actually in good shape; whoever broke into the house for supplies left her room alone. It looked very much as Kerry left it, especially once Ben finished cleaning. He allowed himself to look at more of her pictures on display – some with him, some with their father and mother, some with her friends. Even though the sight of Kerry's smiling face made him sad, cleaning up her room alleviated some of the guilt he felt about what happened to her. Just as Ben finished up, a knock on the door interrupted his moment of self-forgiveness.

He rushed down the steps but didn't bother to pick up the baseball bat he kept by the front door for protection. After all, he was used to people showing up at his house, though it would've been convenient if this visitor arrived a few minutes earlier. Ben felt a bit like the town's mayor when he got such visitors; many of the town's major decisions still went through him though they'd been back in Lehigh for five months already. When he opened the door, he

recognized one of his former seacraft passengers, Ryan Jenkins, who was red in the face and clearly winded. His family's farm was one of the first properties within the city limits so he was tasked with being one of the lookouts. Since Jenkins apparently sprinted the mile from his farm to Ben's house, he was out of breath and unintelligible when he tried to speak.

"Just hold on and catch your breath," Ben told him, though he realized the town might be in danger. "Just nod if you think I need to get my gun."

Ben was as frightened of Lehigh being ambushed as the rest of the town's citizens though only two drifters passed through since they'd been back.

"A large group... is coming," Jenkins finally spit out before gasping for more air.

Any positive feelings Ben worked up from his time in Kerry's room instantly vanished, sucked away by the dread of their town's impending invasion. And since the intruders were probably close, he knew they had to hurry and warn the others.

"I'll grab my gun before they get here," Ben said.

He barely wheeled around to head toward his father's gun-rack before Jenkins stopped him.

"Wait! They're not coming this way," Jenkins said. Now that he caught his breath, Jenkins appeared less perturbed – actually, more excited – which confused Ben. "They're going to the high school."

"How do you know that?"

"That's what Geoff Howard told me," Jenkins said, referring to one of the other town lookouts. "He was the first to spot the group and when he talked to them, he said we should *all* meet at the high school, the entire town."

"Why should we do that? Why should we let a potential enemy into one of our buildings?" Ben asked.

"They're *not* our enemy, that's what I've been trying to tell you," Jenkins said. "It's *them*. They're finally home."

It suddenly felt like ice water had been put in Ben's veins. He knew exactly who Jenkins was talking about, knew it from the young

man's excitement. This was truly the final miracle the rest of the town waited for and Ben realized there'd be hundreds of happy people receiving news. He was probably the only person in Lehigh who hadn't wished for this moment, which also made him feel like the guiltiest person in town.

"Is my... father with them?" he asked, unsure which answer he wanted to hear.

"I don't know, I rushed here before finding out if *my* parents were with them," Jenkins said. "Now let's go, we have a lot more people to tell before meeting at the auditorium."

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Lehigh High School was about two miles from Ben's house, but the long walk seemed to take no time at all, even as he and Jenkins stopped at numerous houses along the way to inform others. News spread quickly around town. No sooner had Ben and Jenkins told the first few people than they started seeing dozens swarming the streets, everyone talking excitedly and rushing toward the high school. Jenkins was excited like everyone else but Ben barely paid attention as the young man rattled on and answered questions with simple, single-word responses.

By the time they reached the school, Ben and Jenkins were two of the last people to arrive. The building – like the majority of Lehigh's houses – remained mostly intact and now served to house a number of seacraft survivors, mostly non-residents who hadn't wanted to intrude in others' homes. As Ben entered the main lobby and walked down the first hallway, he saw many classrooms empty. As he walked farther along, he figured out why. A loud commotion came from the direction of the auditorium, which he assumed would be filled with Lehigh's citizens – those from the seacraft *and* the underground ark. Ben worried his father would've already heard about Kerry though he couldn't decide if that would be a good thing or not...

Ben practically ran to keep up with Jenkins as they approached the auditorium. Once they burst through the double doors to the large

performance room, they saw the place filled. There was a buzz of excitement and joy from reunions happening all around; the townspeople broke into many smaller sects inside the auditorium, smaller families celebrating the survival of their members.

“Ryan!” a woman called out.

Ben and Ryan turned toward the sound of the voice. Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins – both nearly unrecognizable from looking so haggard – stood nearby, their faces lighting up when they saw their son. Without another word to Ben, Ryan Jenkins rushed toward his family, another happy ending to countless family stories happening around them.

Ben started to search for his father among the groups but it was obvious he wasn’t near the auditorium’s entrance. When he spotted a large group down by the stage – a group that seemed to encircle one person – Ben assumed his father must’ve been drawing the crowd. As he made the long walk down the aisle, he noticed other underground ark survivors looked similar to Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins. Dirty, cold and emaciated were the first words that came to Ben’s mind but nobody seemed to focus on the bad at the moment.

Still, he couldn’t help but notice that when some newcomers spotted him, their smiles turned to frowns. He assumed this meant the news about Kerry’s death *had* gotten around. When he reached the large group near the stage, he forced his way through to the front, expecting to find his father distraught about what happened to his little girl. Instead, he found Mr. Howard regaling listeners with some kind of story, which he immediately stopped once he locked eyes with Ben.

“I’ll finish this another time,” Mr. Howard told his disappointed crowd. “Ben, I need to talk to you.”

Mr. Howard excused himself from his family and the others and pulled Ben to the side, where they could speak in private.

“Where’s my Dad? Did he already hear about Kerry?” Ben asked.

“I was sad to hear about your sister, Kerry always seemed like a fine young lady,” Mr. Howard said sadly.

“My father?” Ben repeated.

"I'm sorry, son, but I have more awful news to give you," Mr. Howard said. "Your father also passed away."

Ben's numbed fear instantly dissipated and was replaced by – he was ashamed to admit – a sense of comfort. He never would've wished his father to die but learning about Kerry's death would've killed a big part of him.

"How?" Ben asked.

"There was a cave-in soon after the comet strike that killed a lot of people and injured even more," Mr. Howard explained. "Your father was hurt badly during the collapse but was a strong man and survived. But there was a zoo at the facility and a few animals escaped from their cages and killed several people before ultimately caught and destroyed. Unfortunately, your father was in no condition to evade these animals and was killed. From what I heard, he willingly sacrificed himself so others could escape. His bravery undoubtedly saved countless lives."

The thought of his injured father being mauled to death was horrible but Ben wasn't surprised his dad died like a hero.

"Again, I can't tell you how sorry I am about your losses but from what I've heard from my son and other survivors, you displayed just as much heroism as your father in the time of crisis," Mr. Howard said.

"I didn't do anything special, nothing different from everybody else," Ben said, trying to downplay his efforts.

"Modest, just like the mayor. But according to everyone here, *you're* the main reason everyone survived, *you're* the reason everyone made it back to Lehigh. And from a personal standpoint, *you're* the reason my son is alive and back home. For that, I will forever be indebted to you," Mr. Howard said. The man extended his hand and vigorously pumped Ben's. "The mayor would be very proud of you."

Ben felt a surge of emotion well up in his chest and was suddenly afraid that emotion would escape through his eyes. Since Mr. Howard appeared on the verge of tears himself, Ben knew the man would think no less if he broke down and cried. But Ben couldn't bring himself to shed tears in front of another man and quickly

changed the subject.

“How did you get back here?” he asked. “It must’ve been a long journey.”

“You have no idea,” Mr. Howard said. “I just started telling it to everyone when you showed up. Why don’t we go back and join the others so they can hear it, too?”

Ben nodded and followed Mr. Howard back to the group near the stage. The story of their trip back to Kansas started at the entrance to the underground facility in the middle of a Russian mountain range. After the Russians moved out of the facility after many difficult, dangerous years living beneath the surface, the remaining Americans boarded the only aircraft at their disposal – a Russian Army helicopter – and began the flight west toward the Atlantic Ocean. In a shocking move, Andrew Brighton – the last President of the United States – took his family off the overloaded chopper seconds before liftoff. Some thought Brighton did this as a sacrifice, a way to make the crowded helicopter lighter and safer for the benefit of everyone else; others figured the sudden departure had something to do with the relationship between the president’s son and a Russian girl. Either way, the chopper took off with a limited fuel supply but made it all the way to France before finally setting down.

Europe suffered as much damage as America, though the group ran across a few survivors who’d pointed them in the right direction. The plan was to reach the Atlantic and hope to find a boat to sail across the ocean. But things hadn’t gone as they hoped.

“There was nothing along the coast, not a single boat seemed to survive,” Mr. Howard said. “Once we reached the coast, we found that tsunamis totally wiped out everything, including the original coastline. We found a Frenchman living along the shore and he told us the coastline of France was pushed inland for miles, completely swallowed by the ocean.”

From there, facility survivors spent months journeying the French coast, praying for some sign of a boat or any other means of getting across the huge ocean. Farther inland, they found the remains of a few smaller boats carried miles from their original docking spots

but they all suffered serious damage; there was only enough room aboard for a small percentage of survivors.

“But since we weren’t finding other options, we finally decided to try fixing one boat to see if somebody could make it to America, where we hoped to find a boat big enough to come back for the rest,” Mr. Howard continued. “Unfortunately, that plan was a nightmare. We caught enough fish along the shore to stay alive but life was far from easy and we were all weak, which did not help when trying to move an entire boat. Before we figured out the best way to get the boat to shore, our luck changed.”

Early one morning, the small group of survivors tasked with catching fish for the group thought they spotted a whale a few hundred feet into the ocean. But the longer they stared in awe at this creature rising from the waters, they began to realize this was no whale.

“We had no idea what kind of monster it was until we suddenly spotted a small rowboat emerge and come our way,” Mr. Howard said.

Ben felt a shiver run down his spine as he realized what suddenly appeared in front of the group.

“It was the seacraft,” he interrupted. “*Our* seacraft.”

“That’s what we discovered,” Mr. Howard said. “Needless to say, we were shocked when we recognized one of the two people in the small rowboat... what’s that kid’s name? The one who used to be such a troublemaker at your school.”

“Used to be? More like *still is* a troublemaker,” Ben said.

“Jeremy tricked us into getting off the seacraft so he could steal it.”

“Yeah, I learned that once I talked to my son,” Mr. Howard said. “But at the time, Jeremy told us he dropped you off in America but had a falling out with the group so he remained aboard.”

“And he just so happened to find you?” Ben asked incredulously.

“No, he just happened to *stumble upon* us,” Mr. Howard said. “We were at the right place at the right time. Truly a miracle, if you ask me, but they showed up in France to drop off one of their own passengers.”

“Jean-Luc,” Ben said.

“Yeah, that’s the guy. Anyway, Jeremy must’ve felt bad for the way he left things with all of you so he offered to take us back to America, which we gratefully accepted.”

Ferrying the Americans to the seacraft took hours and once inside, they met the seacraft’s three other occupants: an attractive, yet slightly neurotic mother; an introverted young man who rarely emerged from the seacraft’s control room; and a beautiful young woman who walked with a noticeable limp. The young woman – who the seacraft survivors knew to be Nikki Jones – apparently formed a romantic relationship with Jeremy since Ben and his people left. The Jones family wasn’t exactly friendly but they weren’t rude either, mostly remaining to themselves during the journey across the Atlantic.

Once the seacraft reached the American coastline, Jeremy insisted they try to get the boat as far inland as possible to make the trek to Kansas easier. To do this, they sailed south and entered the Gulf of Mexico, which became much larger since most of Florida was underwater. The Mississippi River enlarged so much that the seacraft safely passed through it, sailing all the way up to Arkansas before they could go no farther.

“The family aboard the seacraft seemed relieved to have us go but Jeremy continuously apologized for not being able to take us farther. He even suggested we stay aboard until the weather turned warmer,” Mr. Howard explained. “But after weeks of resting and eating properly, our group was invigorated to start the last part of our journey home, regardless of temperatures growing colder.”

The group headed west after leaving the seacraft. They tried to cover as much ground as possible early on since their strength was high after months of resting. But the harsh weather proved draining. Still, their spirits were high and they pushed on, knowing their seemingly impossible journey was coming to an end. They almost strayed too close to the border of Little Rock but learned in Paris to stay away from major cities where gangs of survivors seemed to fester.

“Despite the cold, we persevered and pushed forward during the last month; the thought of our families gave us the strength to

reach Kansas and Lehigh,” Mr. Howard said. “And then when we reached the city limits and I saw my son...” The man became choked up a moment before continuing. “When we *all* found out our children returned home, our journey received the final miracle we’d all been praying for.”

As incredible as the facility survivors’ tale had been, they were more amazed by the stories Ben told about life aboard the seacraft and how they made it back to Lehigh...

Over the next several hours, Lehigh High School’s auditorium buzzed with many reunions. Even after all the families found one another, everyone stayed together a while and reconnected as a town, as though they just finished watching the annual school play. But as hours ticked by and the sun began to set, many survivors were anxious to return to their homes. Families began to leave the school, not before many parents stopped to thank Ben Coleman for what he’d done to save their children. Ben continued to be embarrassed by the attention but felt a little better about himself each time a relieved adult told him how proud the mayor would’ve been of what he’d done.

Though Ben had nobody, he still waited at the high school until every last family left. As he watched the final family walk into the distance, a part of him felt jealous that fate left him separated while so many others were brought back together. But when he finally set off back toward his house, one particular thought brought a smile to his face: though he might be alone in Lehigh, at least his mother, father and Kerry were all together in a better place.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

“Come on, children, we should go inside before you all catch colds,” Professor Chris Fratantoro told the group of kids sitting on the ground in front of him.

“But it’s just as cold inside the building. Besides, the sun is shining out here,” a little girl said. “Can’t we stay outside a little longer? We aren’t getting in anyone’s way.”

“Yeah, we wanna stay outside. Please, Professor Frat?” one of the older boys asked.

The professor had to admit the children were right. While temperatures were low, the midday sun shined its brightest and felt warm on their faces, at least whenever a breeze wasn’t blowing.

“Okay but only because you’ve been so good and have listened so closely,” the professor said. “As a special treat, I have a new book for us to begin studying.”

Fratantoro saw the eyes of every child light up, which gave him more satisfaction than he would’ve imagined. He reached into his precious bag of books and pulled out the one from the bottom. It was the final one he’d yet to show them.

“Can anyone read the name of this book?” he asked.

At once, the hands of every child in front popped up, each eager to impress with their reading knowledge. The professor chose the smallest girl near the front of the group.

“Addy? What does this book say?” he asked.

The fair-haired little girl stepped forward without fear and read the name of the book.

“*The Republic*,” Addy said confidently.

“And what is the name of the author?”

“Plato,” she read.

“Very good,” the professor said. “I don’t know if any of you remember, but I’ve spoke about Plato before. Can you tell me where he’s from and why he’s an important historical figure?”

Again, Professor Fratantoro was surprised when every child’s hand raised. Even some of the shyer children – like Addy’s older

brother – didn't hesitate to answer his questions.

"Tristin, do you remember?"

"He was a really famous philosophy guy and he was Geek," Tristin said, drawing laughter from some of the kids. But every one of the kids at the compound were so close with each other that there was little embarrassment among them; Tristin quickly realized his mistake and corrected himself. "I'm sorry, professor, I meant he was Greek."

"Very good," the professor said. "Now in past lessons, I've mentioned Plato along with two other well-known philosophers. One was his teacher, the other his student. Do any of you remember their names?"

As the questions became increasingly harder, the professor expected to see fewer – if *any* – hands being raised. After all, these kids were still young and he hadn't gone into much depth about Greek philosophy nearly two and a half centuries old. But his new students continued to surprise him, as all but the youngest children wanted to answer the question. He pointed to one of the older girls near the back.

"His teacher was Socrates and his student was Aristotle," she answered correctly.

"You children never cease to amaze me," the professor said honestly.

Having taught at one of the most prestigious Ivy League universities before the comet strike, Professor Fratanoro was accustomed to teaching the brightest young adults in the country. He never instructed young children but was pleasantly surprised by how much they absorbed through spoken word alone. The professor wished they had more learning materials – simple things such as pencils and paper – but they apparently didn't need to write things down to remember. In fact, these children seemed more attentive than many bored college students he taught over the years. It didn't even matter that the professor gave these little kids similar college-level lessons.

"*The Republic* is one of the most important pieces of philosophical literature ever written, even though it's more than two—*thousand* years old," the professor explained. "The first section of

this book might one day have a lot to do with how this compound evolves. Has anyone ever heard the word utopia before?”

Even if the children didn’t totally understand the complicated ideas he tried to explain, they still listened with rapt attention to every word he spoke, they still asked to learn more at the end of every lesson. Despite the fact that the professor felt his best asset to the compound was his ability to teach the kids, he couldn’t help occasionally looking up and feeling guilty for not helping with the intense physical labor happening around them. When the professor spotted Jeff – one of the original compound inhabitants placed in charge of the construction expansion project – he handed the book to one of the older children and rushed over to him.

“Hey there, Prof, how are the lessons going?” Jeff asked.

“Very well, as always. These children are advanced for their age; they’re so willing and ready to learn anything I teach them,” the professor said. “But I can’t help notice there’s still so much work to be done around here. I was wondering if I could do anything to assist.”

“You’re already doing what we need most: giving the kids something to do,” Jeff said. “If we didn’t have you to teach them, they’d need something to occupy them and keep them out of the way. If we ever need another set of hands, we know where to find you. It looks like your audience is waiting.”

The professor turned and saw the kids anxiously staring at him. He felt better knowing the others didn’t view him as a lazy work-dodger, though he wouldn’t have been very useful helping them build anyway. Fratanoro was one of the oldest people at the compound and never worked a day of manual labor in his life. He returned to his group and continued lecturing the young children on the idea of utopian societies as described by Fourth-Century B.C. Greek philosophers. Just as he began to explain different kinds of governments described by Plato, the professor was interrupted by a sound that frightened him nearly as much as it did the children: a *ringing* bell.

Fratantoro turned around and saw the compound people running toward their defensive positions along the wall. The professor

guided the children toward the main barn and handed his most prized possessions – his books – to one of the older boys.

“You guys know where to hide,” he told them. “But I want you to take my books in case anything bad happens to me.”

“Be careful, professor,” one of the kids said.

As Professor Fratanoro looked at the children, he wasn’t sure if they appeared more frightened for themselves or him. He felt a great swelling of pride and love for his young students and prayed he’d have the opportunity to give them many more lessons. The professor turned and ran to his assigned position along the wall, climbing the makeshift ladder and joining his ‘battle buddy’ on their perch. Being one of the last people to reach the wall, he immediately asked for an update.

“Looks like a lot of vehicles,” said the other man on the professor’s assigned perch. “I’m sure it’s Pastor Mike returning with – or maybe *without* – the new people.”

The pastor and a few others left the compound early the day before, driving a long caravan of compound vehicles to the location where they expected the final space shuttle to land. Former President George Marshall was supposed to be among the group along with many others, meaning space inside the compound would grow much tighter. Still, with expansion underway, an influx of new workers would be welcomed, as would the supplies the new people would hopefully bring. With the compound’s crops extremely limited during winter months, there was a big shortage of food, especially once everyone finished eating the food brought from *Destinee* and the other shuttle.

“I hope it’s them,” the professor said. “Because if not, we could be in trouble.”

“It *will* be,” his ‘battle buddy’ said. “Don’t worry, I can see the bus already.”

Fratantoro squinted but his eyes weren’t as good as his partner’s. He hoped the man was right. When he looked back at the compound, the professor saw plenty of areas susceptible to attack. With the expansion of the compound’s wall an ongoing process, there were large, open sections not as well defended as the professor

would've hoped. And the expanding wall wasn't the only difference at the compound. Layouts for nearly a dozen new buildings popped up over the months, with two approaching completion. Also close to being finished was a large ditch that nearly reached the compound. It disappeared into the distance, headed in the direction of the river. Ten feet wide and nearly eight deep, the ditch was dug to connect to the river and provide a closer water source without the need of taking a long walk every day. Ditch digging duty was not a detail many people volunteered for but Logan Franklin and his *Destinee* workers were accustomed to digging and made great progress on the project despite their crude tools. Once Franklin and his people completed the task and connected both ends of the U-shaped distributary to the river, life would be much easier at the compound.

At moments like these, when the professor watched the growing civilization, he realized he might be witnessing history in front of his eyes. He always studied and taught the history of ancient civilizations but now he had the honor of watching a new world crawl out of the ashes caused by Comet Clement. He realized one of the most important things he would ever teach his new students was about what happened around them; those kids would then be tasked with teaching future children about what was going on around them right now...

My students are like Plato and I am their Socrates, he thought with a smile.

In the distance, the lead vehicle honked five times upon approach.

"That was the signal Pastor Mike told us to listen for, that means they're safe," said the man next to the professor. "I *told* you we had nothing to worry about. See, he's even waving to us."

Fratantoro indeed saw the compound leader waving through the driver's window of the bus. The professor could also see that the bus – as well as many cars following it – was overflowing with people.

"I guess there'll be a lot more people around."

His 'battle buddy' snorted and began to climb down the ladder. Across the compound, people started to open the gate, allowing the

bus and cars to enter. Now that it was clear there was no immediate danger, most defenders on the wall abandoned their posts and rushed toward the bus to greet the famous newcomers. While Professor Fratanoro wanted to welcome George Marshall as much as anyone else, he stayed positioned on his perch and watched the scene unfold before him. This felt like an important moment in this history of the compound and Fratanoro wanted to absorb as many details as possible to tell others about one day.

Once the vehicles were inside the compound, the gate was immediately closed. Pastor Mike was first off the bus, followed closely by a recognizable figure. Although George Marshall's hair seemed to be grayer in the six months since the professor last saw him, Marshall still seemed strong when he moved, though his body would need days before properly acclimating to gravity. His wife was a different story, as the former First Lady needed help from her husband and the pastor.

Behind the president came Peter Mansfield and his family. Over the last six months, Fratanoro heard plenty of horror stories about the man from Logan Franklin, Lily Edwards and John Fare. During the professor's time aboard the space station, he realized Mansfield was an important part of the decision-making process but not until he was on Earth did he learn that the Chief of Staff was behind nearly every lie ever told to the station's passengers. According to Lily, Mansfield had a serious craving for authority and power, which would make for some interesting times coming up at the compound. Presently, Mansfield somehow appeared both angry and interested as he looked around, though he made sure to keep an eye on his wife and children. The station's two main leaders walked in the pastor's footsteps for the moment, yet the professor wondered if that was how the balance of power would remain in the future...

President Marshall appeared friendly toward those he never met but he didn't remain outside long, as Pastor Mike led him and First Lady into the barn, no doubt so they could rest. Mansfield pointed his family toward the barn but did not enter the building himself, more interested in watching where the rest of his people went. Fratanoro could tell this was the former Chief of Staff's way of

maintaining control, exactly as Lily predicted. But the professor's eyes were drawn toward one particular person in the crowd, who slowly approached Mansfield. Fratanoro didn't know why he watched the seacraft survivor, Earl Ackerman, approach the Chief of Staff but was sure glad he did. Though the professor was too far to hear what Mansfield said to the others, he still saw the expression on the man's face, the look of cockiness like he was in total control of the situation. But when his eyes turned to Ackerman – the quiet, little man who spoke to very few others except Marc the drifter – shock was etched on Mansfield's face, which immediately turned pale. Mansfield shook his head in fear and backed up before finally falling to the ground, apparently unconscious. The professor didn't know what that was about but a few compound residents picked up Mansfield's inert form and carried him inside. Ackerman turned to his buddy Marc and the two shared a laugh.

The next people that caught the professor's attention were Logan Franklin and Lily Edwards, who walked side by side among the other newcomers. To the casual observer, the two might just be friends walking alongside one another, no different from anyone else from the crowd. But Fratanoro heard whispers over the months of a budding relationship between them and the way Logan and Lily looked at each other confirmed these rumors, at least in the professor's mind.

As more newcomers emerged from the vehicles, there were numerous reunions across the compound; former space station passengers greeted many among the final group. Fratanoro tried to imagine changes that would be needed at the compound to sustain so many new inhabitants and realized the amount of growth here would become greater. With the number of people rising exponentially, the professor had the feeling more people – more comet survivors – would begin to show up as the community grew. This would make them a bigger target for trouble but with proper planning – at which the pastor seemed adept – the compound should overcome that. Fratanoro also realized not everyone would remain here. As he learned from studying other growing civilizations in the past, it would

only be a matter of time before some left in search of other places to settle in America, especially once temperatures returned to normal in the coming years. But for now, this compound seemed to be the starting point for the post-apocalyptic world.

Professor Fratantoro remained atop the wall long after the newcomers exited the vehicles and were helped to the few buildings where they could rest. While the arrival of a former president – not to mention the hard-nosed Chief of Staff who passed out as though he'd seen a ghost – would certainly be among the most indelible memories of this day, there was one image above all that Fratantoro would talk about in years to come, a memory that seemed to perfectly entail the human spirit needed to rebuild the world around them.

At the end of the line of cars, near the back of the group of people, were John Fare and Colin McKay. The two best friends – whose reunion was as unlikely a story as any the professor ever heard – walked next to one another like they didn't have a care in the world. Fratantoro was amazed upon hearing the story of how John gave up his spot aboard the seacraft only to learn he was the son of Joshua Clement and had his own place on the space station. From there, John and Colin both survived insurmountable odds to find each other again after so many years. The young men had grown into strong leaders and two of Pastor Mike's most trusted advisors at the compound. Together, John and Colin thrived on the most dangerous missions that needed completing, those that involved leaving the compound to find supplies or search for alternate food sources. Tension at the compound was always high when they were gone – especially from two young women in particular – but they triumphantly returned every time and this trip to the shuttle landing site was no different. The professor pegged the two friends as most likely to one day venture away from the compound and lead other such communities on their own. But for now, Colin and John were all smiles and laughter and seemed happy to be back, especially when they spotted Heather and Emily rushing toward them.

EPILOGUE

NOVEMBER 15, 2030

**TEN YEARS, TWO MONTHS, TWENTY-FOUR DAYS AFTER
IMPACT...**

EARTH'S ORBIT...

Long after the final shuttle carried the last of the space station's occupants back to Earth, the station continued to soar miles above the planet's surface. Although nearly five years passed since the shuttles last fired their boosters and pushed the station back to a higher orbit, the station remained safely above the Earth's atmosphere, circling the planet approximately sixteen times per day. The oxygen, lighting and computer systems had all gone down over the years without proper maintenance but the gyroscopes – which kept the station properly balanced and in its correct orbit – continued to function perfectly. But on this day, the sensor that controlled the gyroscopic system finally blew a fuse after slowly fraying over the course of a year. This caused one of the gyroscopes to shut down. Since the gyroscopes worked in close conjunction with one another, the fact that one malfunctioned and started the space station wobbling quickly affected the others; they all ended up shutting down in rapid succession.

The space station made approximately 30,000 trips around the Earth during the time after the final shuttle left, not to mention the number of trips made when humans lived aboard. But once the final gyroscope stopped spinning and the station lost the final vestiges of its balance, it began what would ultimately be its last orbit around Earth.

The blustering winds awakened AJ Brighton just before the break of dawn, the shrill howling having no effect on the woman lying next to him. Irena never seemed to be as bothered by the cold weather and howling winds as her husband and the way she continued to sleep right now proved that. AJ snuggled closer to her in bed in an attempt to share body warmth and was tempted to close his eyes and drift back to sleep. But he knew there was work to be done – work that *he'd* been tasked with completing – and he could never consider shirking

his responsibilities. So despite his strong desire to escape the bitter coldness any way possible, AJ made sure to keep Irena wrapped tightly in their blanket as he got out of bed.

AJ quickly dressed, all the while thinking about warm weather in America. He thought of his home country from time to time – especially in *colder* times – but knew he'd never likely lay eyes on America again. Russia was his home now, though he still hadn't gotten used to freezing winters the way Irena and other former underground facility survivors had. AJ blew on his hands, rubbing them together. When that didn't warm him up, he approached the small wood burning stove across the room. Made of metal parts salvaged from the underground facility – where the survivors returned to retrieve any materials they could possibly put to use – the stove's flue consisted of a long metal pipe that ran straight up and out of the ceiling. There was always a bit of a smoky smell near the stove but the warmth it provided was a fair – and necessary – tradeoff, especially during the winter. AJ and Irena's small house only had a few simple rooms but during most of the winter, they didn't stray far from the stove.

Besides the stove and their bed, the only other piece of furniture was a small wooden box near the front of their bed. AJ tiptoed as he approached the box but when he peeked inside, he saw a set of big blue eyes staring up at him.

"How long have you been awake?" AJ whispered. "You should still be sleeping, Katina."

AJ's daughter blinked and continued to stare up at her father. He didn't know how long she'd been awake but she hadn't made a sound and it didn't look like she was sleepy. AJ stepped toward the stove to place another log on the fire but that was when baby Katina finally began to make noise.

"Dadada," she said.

AJ added the piece of wood into the stove before heading back to the box-like crib Katina's grandfather made. She happily kicked about and squirmed her way out from under the blanket, though she did not appear cold. AJ picked her up and tried to keep her wrapped tightly in the blanket. But Katina was at the age where she constantly

squirmed and it wasn't long before her father realized the blanket wouldn't stay where he wanted. Katina didn't seem bothered by the low temperature; it amazed AJ to know his daughter was already tougher than him. He carried her closer to the stove to keep her warm and rocked her in his arms in the hope she'd go back to sleep. But Katina obviously had other ideas. She thought her daddy was playing so she laughed and cooed in his arms, clearly not interested in sleeping.

"Shh," he whispered. "You're going to wake Mommy."

"Mom," Katina repeated.

On top of her toughness, AJ was astonished by his daughter's intelligence. She already babbled several words – some in English, some in Russian – though she was barely over a year old. Unfortunately, her intelligence was a problem at the moment as she continued to babble loudly and ignore her father's pleas to quiet.

"Is Katina okay?" Irena asked as she sat up in bed. Her hair was disheveled and she rubbed her tired eyes but AJ still thought she was the most beautiful woman he ever saw.

"She's fine, she doesn't need to be changed and doesn't seem fussy enough to want to eat," AJ said. "Go back to sleep, I'll rock her for a while."

"Are you awake for the day? Is it morning?"

Though their tiny house had no windows and AJ had yet to open the door, his internal clock grew very accurate over the years and he was certain it was just before dawn.

"Yes. I was going to leave once I got Katina back down," he said. "You should go back to sleep, too. The baby had you up a couple times last night."

But Irena quickly stretched in bed before climbing out and walking toward her husband and child. Upon seeing her mother, Katina squirmed in AJ's hands and reached for Irena.

"No, I will wake up with my husband, as a good wife should," Irena said, reaching up to kiss AJ.

AJ finished bundling up before kissing his wife and daughter and heading out the door. If he thought the inside of his house was

cold, the temperatures outside were downright frigid. The wind whipped a heavy dusting of snow into AJ's face. His eyes watered from the extreme cold but he wiped away tears before they turned to ice. As usual, it took him a few minutes to grow accustomed to the weather before he could see beyond the wind and falling snow. There was another smaller house thirty feet ahead of his front door but the blowing snow stopped him from seeing the dozens of other houses scattered about the surrounding acres of land. None of the houses were too close to each other – the one in front of AJ's house was the closest among the entire community – but everyone still remained as tight-knit as they'd been during their years spent at the facility.

And their years spent in space.

After waiting a few minutes for his partners to show up, AJ considered heading toward their homes to make sure they hadn't overslept. But when he finally spotted movement, it wasn't from where he expected. The door to the nearby house opened and a towering figure appeared, slowly *crunching* across the snow and walking in AJ's direction. As if the person's huge stature wasn't enough to identify him, his limp made it more obvious that Ivan was approaching. AJ's father-in-law – like the majority of Russians at the camp – did not appear affected by the cold.

"Is my granddaughter awake?" he asked.

"Yeah, she and Irena just woke up," AJ answered.

"You are still waiting for the two others, yes?"

Ivan looked into the snowy distance but also saw nothing besides the harsh weather.

"Late again," AJ said.

"You would like me to go with you instead?" Ivan asked.

This wasn't the first time AJ's father-in-law wanted to work with him but AJ promised his wife *and* mother-in-law that he wouldn't allow Ivan to go with him and his crew. Ivan might've been in charge of making the camp's major decisions but the women in his life still had control over him, still wouldn't allow him to do dangerous work due to his foot injury. While it was easy for Ivan's wife and daughters to force him to live a less demanding lifestyle, AJ did not feel

comfortable telling the bigger man what he should and should not do. That was why he felt relieved to see two figures suddenly emerge from the snow.

“Here they come, looks like you get to relax,” AJ told Ivan. “But I’m sure Katina would love to see her grandfather.”

Ivan nodded and clasped AJ on the shoulder before heading inside to visit his granddaughter. Two men – one older, the other AJ’s age – approached him holding several crude wooden spears. With nothing more than a nod of greeting, the camp’s three hunters slowly made their way beyond camp and into the barren Russian landscape. Since the three hunters cleared the surrounding lands of prey over the years, they had to walk farther and farther to reach better hunting grounds. It was a daily routine to walk several miles before spotting the first vestiges of animal life but that routine was all the more difficult on bitter cold mornings like today. The only thing that helped pass the time – and helped keep their minds off the snow – was the story-telling ability of the older man; this morning was no different. Although AJ and his former soccer teammate heard most of the stories multiple times, they did not interrupt the third hunter.

“Just when we think we found the best hiding spot to avoid being hit, a large piece of space station ripped free and trapped us in the corner. John – the young man who worked with us – panicked and pulled free our oxygen lines when trying to break free. I did not think we would survive.”

AJ knew how this story ended: a mysterious person reset the SPACE lines of Slava Kovalchuk and his team, giving them enough time to cut through the damaged fragment of space station. AJ often wondered if Slava used a bit of a dramatic license to enhance his stories but based upon what he heard from other station passengers – who stumbled upon the camp soon after AJ had – it sounded like life in space was often crazy. Slava was probably the worst of the three hunters but he was a hard worker, didn’t seem bothered by the cold and told good stories so he was always a welcome addition to their hunts.

Unfortunately, success became harder to come by on recent

hunts and that didn't include just AJ's group. Four different hunting parties – each going in a different direction – left every morning, tasked with providing food for the entire community. While animal tracks were easier to spot in the snow, winter was always the worst time of year for finding food; this year was no different. There were plenty of days when a few groups came back with nothing but that happened too much recently and AJ knew his people were on the verge of starvation. Though he didn't like to talk about it for fear of jinxing them, he knew they *had to* come back with something today.

As the morning sky turned a lighter shade of purple, AJ was encouraged when Slava spotted tiny indentations in the snow.

“Hares,” AJ said. “And it looks like a bunch of them. Maybe there's a nest of them somewhere.”

Hares were difficult to catch because of how fast and elusive they were but they were the one animal still in most abundance. The three hunters followed the tracks until they saw them enter a place very familiar to them. AJ disliked the dark forest as much as his fellow hunters but knew there was no getting around it. Since most trees had been ripped from the ground after the comet strike, it was strange to see so many still standing in such a condensed area. But despite the majority of trees charred and bent at a strange angle, the forest was tricky to navigate. The three hunters hadn't entered the forest since getting lost inside a few years earlier but regardless of danger, AJ saw no way of getting around it.

“We have to go into the forest today,” AJ told the group. “We don't have the luxury of coming back with nothing.”

“Even after what happened last time?” the other young man asked.

“AJ is right,” Slava agreed. “I know this is not where we want to go but we need to bring back food.”

Despite the last forest fiasco, the three men slowly headed toward the first line of trees. But before they reached them, something caught AJ's attention and he stopped to point at the sky.

“What is that?” he asked.

The three hunters spotted a bright light streaking against the

early morning sky, growing brighter with every passing second. Though Slava and AJ watched with more fascination than fear, their third companion clearly had another idea.

“Is another comet?” he asked. “Is going to finish job Clement started so many years ago?”

AJ’s knowledge on the subject was too limited for him to have a firm opinion but hearing the third hunter say this made him wish he was back with his wife and daughter. Before his own fear had time to build, Slava Kovalchuk interceded.

“I do not think is comet, the light is not big enough to be threat,” the space expert said. “But I *do* think there is something that burns up in Earth’s atmosphere.”

AJ had no idea what could’ve possibly entered the Earth’s atmosphere to cause such a bright light. But just as suddenly as the light appeared, it burned out in the sky above. The three hunters continued to stare up in silence for several more seconds until they were certain nothing else was following the white streak. AJ breathed a sigh of relief before turning his attention back toward the tiny tracks in the snow.

“There’s nothing more to see,” AJ said. “It’s time to catch some food.”

Though the three hunters would be talking about this mysterious streak of light for years to come, they entered the woods that morning with the sole intention of providing for their people.

Note from the author:

The Comet Clement series were the first books I ever wrote. Though rough in parts, I worked hard to smooth out those edges and present the best story I could. But I never would've been able to finish without the support of so many readers. It still amazes me to this day whenever I see sales climbing for each book. If you've made it this far, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. And if you've enjoyed Comet Clement and don't want it to end, I have a FREE treat for you.

While writing the books, there was one minor story line that was part of the earlier books that I was never able to finish because I didn't think it was relevant in the grander scheme in later books. But I've written one more chapter that ties up this loose end. Please become a fan of the "Kevin George – Author" Facebook fan page and send me a quick message; I'd be more than happy to email it to you. I hope you enjoy this little added ending as much as the rest of the books. Thanks again for all of your support!

STAY TUNED FOR A PREVIEW OF MY NEW SERIES, CRYO-MAN!

MY PLEA TO READERS – As an independent author, it is difficult to convince readers to try my book; for that, I thank you. But to help spread the word, please leave me feedback on the web-site where you purchased this book. I've found that reviews are the most important determination in whether many readers will try a new author.

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- Kevin

TO LEAVE COMMENTS FOR THE AUTHOR OR ANSWER THE QUESTION ABOUT WHICH OF THE THREE ARKS YOU'D CHOOSE, BECOME A FAN OF THE KEVIN GEORGE - AUTHOR FAN PAGE ON FACEBOOK!

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PROLOGUE

Laughter fills the air, high-pitched laughter that's equal parts mischievous glee and unadulterated joy.

"You can't catch me," a tiny voice calls out, followed by the pitter-patter of tiny feet slapping against hardwood flooring.

"We'll see about that," I say, dropping my voice several octaves, doing my best impression of a diabolical villain.

My voice causes a frightened squeal but then even more frantic laughter. I try a deep-throated laugh to match but the effort launches me into a coughing fit. This is the worst one yet and the coppery taste of blood crawls up the back of my throat. I nearly gag trying to swallow it back down. But I refuse to let it slow me, refuse to let it quiet the tiny laughter that runs around the corner of this room and rushes into the next. When the heaving calms, I turn it into the deep laugh and run faster.

Not that I catch up any sooner, especially when I stumble over an army of action figures scattered about the floor. I nearly yell about the mess but I have nobody to blame but myself. I bought every toy – of which there are many – in the entire house. I spoil the kid; he constantly reminds me how he loves me even *more* when I buy him presents but I don't care. I figure it's the least I can do for him. The thought brings a smile to my face but deep down, it cracks open the door to the sadness in my heart. As I look down at all the ignored toys on the floor, I suddenly feel an overwhelming need to provide him with something more significant.

I stop my pursuit and turn around, hearing the laughter and footsteps fade for just a moment as my little boy loops around the kitchen, through the dining room and back into our living room. When he sees me waiting for him, he screams in delight and fear; no matter how many times I've done this to him, he never expects it.

"Gotcha!" I cry and lift him high into the air, his head inches from the ceiling. He suddenly feels heavier than I remember but I can't tell if he's just getting bigger or I'm getting weaker.

"No fair," he says. I tickle him before he protests too much.

I carry him to the couch and sit down, gently placing him next to me. I take a deep breath, my body glad for the break though we've only done a few laps around the house. It wasn't that long ago when I could keep up with his pace for hours...

"You can't get me," the boy says, trying to jump off the couch the moment I let go of him. Luckily, I'm still quick enough to catch him before his little feet hit the floor and take off running. He tries to squirm out of my grasp but I hold him tight and tell him to calm down. He sighs but does as I say, recognizing when my tone gets serious. Still, his feet dangle off the edge of the couch and kick away, ready to start running at the first chance I give him.

I hold his soft little hand and try to make eye contact but he barely looks back at me. It annoys me that he's not taking this moment as seriously as I hope, that he doesn't feel how special this is to me. But I shake my head at my own foolishness; what can I really expect from a four-year-old?

"Buddy, I just want to talk to you a minute," I say softly.

His wild eyes relax and focus on me, his feet stop kicking. He smiles wide and my chest tightens, my heart swelling. I think he's finally ready for our first – and hopefully not last – heart-to-heart talk.

"Are you going to give me another present?" he asks excitedly.

I shake my head and he frowns.

"Hopefully something better," I say.

His little eyebrows lower in a V and his lips curl down. He leans away from me, clearly skeptical.

"Better than a *present*?"

My chest is still tight, my breathing increasingly ragged. I didn't realize our little chase had taken so much out of me, made me sweat so much.

"I just want to tell you how much I love you, how much Daddy will always love you, no matter how old you are or where you are in life," I say, emotions flooding out of me in a way only a parent could truly understand. I tap his chest. "I will always be with you in there, always watch over you. And I promise, that's more important than any toy or present I could ever give you."

The boy smiles and climbs higher onto the couch, sitting on his knees beside me. He reaches his arm out and I'm excited for the hug that must be coming, for the confirmation that he understands the importance of what I'm trying to say. A big grin crosses his face and he reaches for my face, squeezing my nose.

"Honk!" he says, erupting into a fit of giggles.

I shake my head but grab him and pull him in for a tight hug, a kiss on the head. I shouldn't be surprised that he's grown bored with my sentimentality; I've been giving him this same speech every day for months. He wiggles his way free and takes off running again, turning to me before he leaves the living room.

"You can't catch me!" he says, though this time his voice is filled with as much hope as mine had just been.

He can tell that I'm tired, that I don't want to run around anymore, but he hopes we can keep playing. I won't have many more opportunities like this, a realization that hits me like a sledgehammer and leaves me angrier than I've felt since the doctors told me how sick I really am. But I'm not angry at the illness as much as I'm angry about the future being robbed from me. The boy is already so much like me in other ways that I pray he doesn't grow up feeling robbed or that his childhood lacks in any way. Those thoughts spur me to get off the couch and start running again despite protests from my body. I could listen to his laughter all day but the sound is quickly drowned out by my coughing. I only take a few steps in his direction when I feel my legs turn to wet noodles. Weakness and shortness of breath are nothing new so I push through the discomfort, ignore it the best I can. The limitations of my condition are constantly on my mind but I don't want to live my life in fear, especially at this moment. I somehow complete two laps around the circle of rooms, never once a threat to catch my son, who continues to taunt me between laughter. But I no sooner enter the kitchen a third time when willpower loses the battle to my body.

I stop and lean against the pantry door, determined to stop myself from collapsing and passing out. Breathing is my main concern and I inhale slowly and deeply, trying to fill my lungs with oxygen in the

hopes of clearing my fuzzy vision, slowing my racing heartbeat. Everything seems to slow down around me, the boy's laughter fading into the distance though he's nearly lapped me and gets closer again. It's not until I blink my eyes hard and focus that I realize the boy's face is inches in front of mine, that I've slumped down to the floor. The smile on his face has disappeared; he might only be four but he can still tell when there's a problem.

"Daddy, are you going to Heaven now?" he asks.

The simple question breaks my heart, though that's not the only thing breaking inside me. My head is growing lighter and all my concentration is required to keep breathing and remain sitting upright. As much as I want to assure the boy that everything will be fine, now is *not* the time for sugarcoating things, especially when I need his help. I nearly tip over as I reach into my pocket but I find my cell phone and clumsily yank it out. His eyes light up for a second until he realizes he won't be playing games on it this time.

"I love you, buddy, but I need you to..." I have to stop and catch my breath, if only to have enough strength to tell him what must be done. We've gone over it countless times but he's still just a little kid. The corners of my vision are starting to go black but I keep my boy's scared face directly in front of me. "I need you to make the phone call, just like we practiced."

My hand shakes as I turn on the phone and scroll through my list of favorite contacts. When I come upon the name Katina, my heart aches for a different reason. I would love to hear her voice one last time but we've already discussed this moment, agreed that emotions can't get in the way of my future. She's wanted to stop working to spend every last second with me but that just wasn't an option. I insisted life continue as usual for us all. Besides, we couldn't risk losing her insurance coverage, especially since my *other* final expense will be so costly.

My vision goes blurry as I find the entry labeled CIFPOL. I push the green button to dial and hand the phone to the boy, the soft skin of his hand brushing against the back of my fingers. It makes me want to smile and cry at the same time.

Gravity and weakness finally defeat me. I crash to the tile floor. I don't feel the pain of my head smashing down though an explosion of stars suddenly dots the spreading darkness in front of my eyes. The boy weakly cries out "Daddy" and I'm worried he won't be up to the one task we've gone over countless times. It seems like I should be panicked about that but my head feels so light that nothing worries me anymore. The feeling is so surreal – so pleasant – that I wonder if I even *want* him to succeed at this point...

Even though his voice is fading, the next words he says are strong; it's the oldest I've ever heard him sound. For the first time, I'm confident he'll survive just fine without me.

"Daddy told me to call and tell you when he's about to go to Heaven," my son says.

My world goes black and somewhere in the distance I hear the echo of a crying baby. But it's the last word my son says that sparks the final thought in my mind. I can't believe it's taken me this long to remember. The rest of my body is quickly shutting down but I force a final tiny gasp of breath, just enough so I can say one more thing. My words come out barely a whisper; I wish I could see my son's face to tell whether he hears me.

"Tell Mommy to remember the box..."

"I will, Daddy," the boy says. "Yes, I'm still here. Come get him quick... his name is – "

CHAPTER ONE

Coldness, so mind numbing that my brain is incapable of processing anything else, my body incapable of feeling or sensing anything else. What could possibly cause such coldness I don't know. How a person could survive such coldness I don't know. In fact, I know nothing *but* coldness and I don't think that will ever end...

Hissing, high-pitched and far away. It's the first of several sounds my brain recognizes once coldness abates enough to allow me to think. Drilling is next followed by something that sounds like scraping metal. I may be able to distinguish these sounds from one another but my mind hasn't warmed enough to figure out what they all mean. I don't even realize I *should* be questioning what's happening until I hear grunting, *human* grunting.

My next sense to return is sight, which comes in the form of dim light filtering through my closed eyelids. Instinctually I try to open my eyes but they don't move – frozen shut. Everything feels frozen and I finally realize this isn't quite right, like I'm stuck in a strange dream where things are happening that don't make sense. A loud whirring comes next and my brain finally conjures a single word I wish it hadn't.

Saw.

Strong vibrations pulse throughout my head. My brain finally feels like it busts free from ice as it rattles around inside my skull. The whirring saw sounds distant but growing louder, coming closer. My emotions are slow and jumbled but I'm just clear-headed enough to realize that what I feel is fear. It doesn't take long for my instincts to prove correct. I don't think feeling pain is possible through the numbing cold but I'm *way* off about that. An agonizing jolt attacks my entire body. In an instant, the darkness in front of my eyes turns bright white. The next sound I hear is quieter than the rest but comes from my lips and echoes in my head.

I moan, the noise faint, barely escaping me. The cacophony of other sounds comes to an abrupt halt. The bright pain fades as I feel the shadow of a person descending toward my face. The gurgling of

wet breathing is somewhere close; I can't tell if I'm making that noise or someone else is. Another sound joins the gurgling, though I don't need normal hearing to know it's the oddest voice I've ever heard.

"You can hear me?"

The tone is raised, almost breathless. My mind struggles to comprehend the meaning of the words but the tone is one I know. I'm proud when my brain conjures another word deep from the recesses of my mind.

Excited, that's how the voice sounds. The idea of conversing is too distant to consider but I still manage to moan in response.

"I've brought one back, I can't believe it," the voice says. "Don't worry, I *will* fix you."

I want to ask what has to be fixed but now that I finally think more clearly, the pain becomes too great. My consciousness is fleeting and another noise begins to pound in my ears, a deep, intermittent *thumping*. I struggle to figure it out until another word comes to me: heartbeat, *my* heartbeat. It's not quite rhythmic the way it should be but I don't have time to ponder this problem. The drilling begins again and this time I feel something against the back of my head. The pain is explosive. I want to scream but I have no breath to make a sound.

Mercifully, the pain begins to fade, as does the rest of the noise around me. I suddenly feel a spark of life in my brain and hear a voice loud and clear. But this one is smaller than the other and I don't hear it in my ears but in my mind. It leaves me even more confused, the words echoing in my head just before my brain shuts down entirely.

"Daddy, are you going to Heaven now?"

CHAPTER TWO

Tap... tap... silence for a few moments before... tap... tap... tap... The first few moments of tapping seem to echo from the end of a long tunnel. But like a car speeding toward me, the sound grows louder until it echoes all around my head. When it stops, I listen for the thumping of my heart again but hear nothing. I feel nothing either; no coldness, no blinding pain, nothing. One word continues to repeat itself in my mind: Heaven.

Am I dead? Experiencing nothingness almost makes me long for the cold and pain, two feelings that at least told me I was still alive. But then I hear the gurgling voice. This time it sounds quiet and hollow, far away and yet somehow all around me. My brain still feels like it moves in slow motion because I don't understand any of the words being spoken.

The tapping begins anew, much louder than before. I don't know how to respond, if I'm supposed to do or say something. A few seconds of silence follows and then the voice speaks again, still hollow and all encompassing but louder than the last round of tapping. I recognize words being spoken but my brain is slow to register their meaning.

"Let's try it louder."

I don't know how to respond. Another few seconds of clicking and then more tapping, so loud this time that my head feels like it may implode. For the first time since regaining consciousness, I feel movement that I've caused. My eyes are already closed but my face twitches, my eyelids squeezing shut even tighter. I feel my brow furrow and the rest of my face scrunches in pain. Every movement feels pronounced; I sense the slightest twinge of every facial muscle. Despite the agony from such loud noise, it feels good to move my face, good to stretch out muscles that feel like they've been dormant a long time.

My equilibrium is disturbed and I'm pretty sure the rest of my body shifted in response to the noise. But I don't feel the pain or relief of my bodily muscles being put to use. In fact, I feel nothing at all

anywhere else on my body. The sound of crunching metal – which directly corresponds to my shifting – grows louder and more agonizing as I squirm, only coming to a stop when I finally go still. I feel like I'm out of breath; more specifically, I can't take a breath at all. I'm confused but now that I'm calmer, the noise has stopped and I no longer feel like my head will pop. Staying still and quiet seems to work best, though my only clear thought is that something is seriously wrong.

The clicking fills my ears again and I'm worried more eardrum-bursting noise will follow. Why would anyone want to torture me? But the next round of tapping – while still inexplicably hollow – is much quieter, at a normal volume, still very close.

“Can you hear me?” the gurgling voice asks.

It sounds like the speaker has a sip of water in his – or her, I can't quite tell – mouth when he – or she – speaks. This time, my mind comprehends the string of words and what they all mean when put together. This is where I'm supposed to answer – supposed to talk – but I don't know how. The only thing I'm physically capable of doing is moving my head, which I turn slightly to the side. I'm not sure it's a clear enough response so I try to move even more. The crunching metal noise returns and though I can't feel my body moving, I wonder if I might be knocking something over. The sound stops when I stop so I'm convinced I have something to do with it. I move my head back in place and this time hear a quiet whirring.

“I'll take that as a yes,” the voice says. “And since you've calmed down, I'm guessing we have the volume just about right. Sorry about that before. Wish I could make things easier on you but I'm learning as I go, too.”

The person chuckles nervously. For all I know he could be lying but at least he doesn't sound like he means to torture me.

“Can you move?” he asks. “I mean, I *know* you can move but can you control it?”

I don't answer; the truth is I don't know how to answer, nor do I know what the answer is.

“Let's start easy, can you wiggle your toes?” he asks.

My brain fights through the mire of confusion to understand what he wants me to do. I feel a strange desire to do as the voice says – to please the voice in any way possible – but what he asks seems impossible. I concentrate as best I can and try to move my toes but I feel nothing. Another word immediately comes to mind. It sounds strange but leaves me panicked when I remember what it means.

Paralyzed.

I try even harder, focus intently on my toes, but still feel nothing. I do, however, hear the odd whirring sound again followed thereafter by metal clanging against metal. My eyes remained closed but the equilibrium in my head has become distorted and I feel a rocking sensation.

“Okay, okay,” the voice says with a mixture of urgency and excitement. “You can stop now, stop.”

I don’t know what he wants me to stop but I try to do as he tells me. The metal immediately stops clanging.

“This could take some getting used to,” the voice says. “How about something simpler? Can you open your eyes?”

I’ve known my eyes were shut but I hadn’t considered opening them yet. Now that I try, I find that I can’t. In my mind, I tell my eyelids to part but somehow the message gets lost between brain and face. I don’t know how to do it, don’t know how to get my body to do as I command. It’s very frustrating but I don’t give up. The best I can manage to do is cause slight metallic vibrations beneath my body as I grow increasingly discouraged.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, just relax,” the voice says. I do as he says and the vibrations cease. “This is probably my fault, not yours. I’ll try to fix it. It’s all about connecting to the right part. This might feel a bit... uncomfortable.”

The person’s shadow fades away and I sense bright lights above me again. Moments later there’s a hissing of air and the noises around me no longer sound hollow. It’s a relief when I finally feel something, though the pressure pressing against the back of my head is strange and discomfiting. Something seems to poke and prod at my mind and I feel different sensations in my face, twitching that I’m not doing

on purpose in my cheeks and chin and lips.

And finally in my eyelids. The prodding stops for a moment but when it happens again, my eyelids twitch once more, separate just enough to allow in a thin stream of light. The voice speaks and no longer sounds hollow or distant.

“Think I’ve got it now,” the person says, his voice full of pride. He sounds as relieved as I feel. “Just a moment now.”

I hear a *thwup*, the sound like a... like a vacuum being sealed. This comparison comes much clearer than any thought I’ve had yet. In an instant, my thoughts are no longer muddled, as if a light switch in my brain has been flipped on. I think I’ve also regained the ability to move, though I only test that theory on my face. I open my eyes. Light streams in so brightly from above that I recoil. The pain is intense so I immediately shut them. Though I only opened my eyes a moment, my brain somehow registered that the rest of the room around me is dark.

“I’m sorry,” the voice says, sounding nearby yet hollow once again. “I should’ve realized your eyes wouldn’t be accustomed to light after... such a long time being closed.”

The light through my lids soon dims.

“Please, try again,” the voice says.

I open my eyes slower, allowing in smaller amounts of light until I get used to the soft glow. Lots of blinking ensues but they soon adjust. Soon I see not just the source of light above but the reflection of that light against glass inches in front of my eyes, completely surrounding my head. The word to describe the glass comes to mind much quicker than my earlier realizations.

Dome, a glass one covering my entire head. At least I’ve figured out what caused the tapping and the distant hollowness to everything I hear. I turn away from the light just enough to see the reflection of my eyes in the glass. They’re wide and unblinking, unnatural yet familiar. I know they’re mine but even with my mind unfrozen, that’s all I do know about myself. I try to tap into my memory but I can’t connect with it. I can’t remember anything... except a voice, a tiny one not my own, a voice that wonders if I’m going to a place called Heaven...

“Very good, I’m getting the hang of this,” the nearby voice says. “We

both are. That's two senses down."

I turn my head toward the voice. It's hard to pinpoint any sound with everything so hollow; this will take some getting used to. Though I don't see the other person, my eyes have adjusted enough to take in my surroundings. I'm in a plain white room; the first word that pops into my mind is sterile. I'm in a laying position and look toward the ceiling, seeing nothing of note beyond the few spotlights. Wanting more, I try to sit up but can't. The word 'paralyzed' comes to mind again.

"You want to see more, I understand," the person says. "We'll get to that soon... hopefully."

I finally spot movement in my periphery but the person is just out of the light, moving along the edge of shadows in the room. I turn my head to follow him and once again hear the whirring sound, this time louder and clearer. I notice it has a faint metallic grinding quality to it. The noise stops when I can no longer turn my neck, my movements severely restricted by the glass dome. At least I *hope* it's the dome and not a more serious problem...

While glancing around for the other person, I end up with the perfect angle to see more of my own reflection. The blue of my eyes is clear to see but so are the tendrils of redness where the whites used to be. Maybe it's just a trick of the lighting but the rest of my face – cheeks, nose, especially my lips – appears tinged a noticeable shade of blue. I close my eyes and turn back toward the light so I no longer have to see the reflection of a dead man looking back at me.

Now I'm seriously freaked out and want some answers. I concentrate on opening my mouth to talk but nothing happens. No air comes in or out of my mouth, which makes speaking impossible. I try to breathe but an unseen force stops me from doing so. How can I be alive if I'm not breathing? Am I on some sort of machine that keeps my lungs working? Is that what's causing the mechanical whirring? If this were the situation, I'm pretty sure tubes would be shoved down my throat and my mouth would be taped shut, neither of which seems to be the case. I open my mouth again to check but I'm still unable to make a sound or suck air into my lungs. Not being able to breathe

launches me into a frustrated panic and it's not long before I hear more whirring and twisting metal.

The shadow of the person passes behind me and I hear his gurgling voice, the tone soft and soothing.

"Calm down, just relax," he says. I try to heed his words and the noise stops. I don't know why the strange voice has such a soothing effect on me but it does. "You're opening your mouth because you want to say something?"

I nod but my head barely moves. Instead, I blink my eyes several times with the hope he'll understand.

"Incredible," he says breathlessly. "I'm astounded by your level of brain activity, especially since none of the others survived long enough to... well, never mind, that's not important now."

If I could gulp, I would. I feel a strong proclivity to trust this person but the last thing he said doesn't instill much confidence in me. I'm also becoming more apprehensive about not being able to see him. But just when I start to worry why he's sticking to the shadows, he steps into the light... not that I'm able to tell whether it is a he.

He stands between my glass dome and the light so his head remains in shadow, at least the part of his head I actually see. The person is heavily shrouded, a hood like the headpiece of a burqa covering everything but his eyes, which are opened wide and slightly crazed? Or is that more of a focused look? Either way, the only thing I figure is that I'm in some sort of hospital and this person is some sort of doctor. I just wish I could remember how I got hurt or how I got here or *anything* else.

Almost anything. I wrack my mind but only find the image of a young boy, who calls me some sort of strange word and talks about going to a place called Heaven. I see the boy's face in my mind as clearly as anything in the room around me but I don't recall his name or how I know him. Still, the spark of emotion I feel at the thought of him makes it pretty clear he's important to me... somehow. Ultimately, I don't know what the feeling means and it's even more confusing since I don't recall anything about myself.

"Just going to open this up here and work on you a bit," the

person says in front of me. “Try to relax, I’m fairly certain I’ve got this figured out.”

I open my mouth to ask “fairly certain?” but nothing comes out. I watch the person’s covered head reach toward the glass dome, which he slowly lifts off me. I imagine the air is stale within the dome but I can’t take a deep breath now to confirm that. I stare wide-eyed at the small metal tool the person lowers toward me.

“Don’t worry, this shouldn’t hurt,” he says.

At this point, I’m pretty sure my initial assumption is correct that this person is a he; I’d think a woman would be more delicate with her words to keep me calm. Still, there’s something about this cloaked figure that I trust, even as he aims the tool’s red laser toward my neck. Sparks fly. Though I feel no pain, it’s hard to control my nerves and stop from flinching. The crunching of metal sounds much closer this time and the man turns off the laser. He leans closer to my face and I see that his eyes look in worse shape than mine. The whites of his eyes are dull yellow while his irises are bright red, a color I’ve never seen in an eye before. I wonder if he’s worse off than I am. But looking at him calms me down and stops the clanging metal. He just nods, not needing to say anything before continuing to work.

Faint wisps of smoke rise toward the ceiling but I can’t smell it, can’t intake breath to even try. I begin to count in my mind to keep calm but don’t reach twenty before the odd man stops.

“Okay, try again,” he says.

I concentrate on opening my lips but no words come out.

“Not your lips,” he says. “Focus on using your voice from within your throat. Now say something.”

“Something,” another voice says.

It takes a second to realize the voice is mine... kind of. Though I feel my lips parted, the voice doesn’t come from my mouth, instead emanating from my throat. The sound reminds me of when I put my face close to a box fan when I was a kid and began to talk. My voice is garbled, robotic, unnatural. I think this should be cause for concern but the man’s strange eyes seem to smile beneath his shroud.

“This is truly a relief, you are doing excellent,” he says. “It’s

been a long time since I've done this sort of work. I was really beginning to doubt my abilities.”

The man steps away and reaches for something just out of view. Moments later, the glass dome lowers back over my head, for reasons that I still don't know.

“Can you say anything else?” the man asks.

Questions race in my mind but I force them to slow down, try to focus on which is most important. One thought emerges from the rest, delivered to my brain by the tiny voice from my lone memory. “Is... this place...” I begin, my voice laden with the same mechanical tone. “...Heaven?”

The smile in the man's eyes vanishes and he slowly shakes his head beneath the shroud.

“I'm sorry but it's the farthest place from.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Do you remember your name?”

I lie completely still and close my eyes halfway; this helps me think. My brain doesn't feel quite so bogged down but my past is still shrouded as much as the man's head. The only memory I can access has become much clearer and that brief snippet might give me the answer to the man's question.

“I don't know... for sure,” I say. “But I remember somebody once calling me Daddy.”

The man's eyebrows turn down. I suppose I've given him the wrong answer.

“Do you remember *how* you got here? Or when you're from?”

I concentrate intently, trying to remember anything else from my life. Frustration sets in quickly and the clanging metal returns momentarily. I have a bad feeling failure is something I'll have to get used to.

“I remember nothing,” I say. “At least nothing that helps me remember anything significant.”

“Hmm,” the man says. “Long-term memory affected. That may be the most difficult – and dangerous – to retrieve. But that no longer matter. In fact, it might be best if you don't have it.”

Regardless of the man's assurances, having no memory does *not* sound right to me. I feel my lips turn down.

“Why doesn't it matter?” I ask, my mechanical voice becoming stronger with each word I say. “Why is it best that I don't remember?”

My mind flashes once again to the image of the young boy. This time, he's running and smiling and giggling. I'm confused about what's happening in the memory but it *feels* important that I hold onto it.

“I don't know when you're from but I have a feeling this world is a much different place,” he says. “It's better to forget a time that no longer exists and look to the future... together. You are truly an incredible specimen to have survived.”

“You... saved me?” I ask.

The smile returns to the man's eyes and he nods proudly.

“Yes,” he says. “But hopefully we end up saving each other. By surviving this... process, you’ve already made me feel better than I have in a long time; I never expected to feel happiness again. The odds of us finding each other – of us both living to reach *this* place in *this* time – were incredibly long. But we’ve done it, together.”

The man’s answers raise more questions in my mind but I don’t know where to begin asking. Any information I’ll get will be from him so there’s one logical question to start with.

“What is *your* name?”

The man looks confused for a moment but then snorts beneath his shroud.

“Nobody’s asked me that for a long time,” he says. “I am ENG-1023. You may call me E; nobody else here to get confused with. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Daddy.”

Hearing him call me Daddy doesn’t quite have the same impact as the little boy from my memory.

“Now we shake hands?” I ask, recalling the social graces of a past life.

I think about raising my arm to extend my hand but feel nothing except the motion of movement. Mechanical whirring begins again as well as the metallic shaking beneath me. This time I don’t stop moving as the noises grow in intensity. The ping of snapping metal explodes nearby and I see a blur of movement from the corner of my eye, a metallic rod that must be part of the medical machinery. The rod suddenly stops moving when I look at it.

“Amazing,” E says breathlessly as he hurries to my side where the rod moved. “You possess extraordinary functioning motor skills already. I can’t believe you can raise your arm.”

Not for the first time – and I have a bad feeling it won’t be the last – I think something is not quite right.

“I didn’t move my... I don’t feel anything...”

But that’s not totally true. I *do* feel a sense of movement, though it’s a disconnected sensation I’ve never before experienced, more of a general shift in my equilibrium.

“Don’t think,” E says. “Just do as I say. Move your arm.”

“But I’m... paralyzed... or something, right?”

E points to the metal rod sticking up at the side of my body.

“Move that,” he says.

I quietly shake my head, confused. “Move it with what? I – ”

“Move it,” he snaps, the gurgling more pronounced as he raises his voice.

He may as well be asking me to walk on water. I have no idea how moving that rod has anything to do with moving my arm but I guess I’ll give it a try –

The rod suddenly shifts to the side. *Move arm*, I tell myself silently and watch as the rod shifts again. I think of moving it back and forth, up and down, side to side; it responds exactly to my thoughts every time, even bending at the elbow-like joint in the middle. My mind races so quickly at the implications that I hardly notice the light whirring noise created by each movement. When I think of raising my other arm, I turn my head to the other side and see a second slab of metal slowly rise. It also does exactly as I command and I make my movements quicker, stronger. A thick metal chain snaps off me and shoots toward E, missing him by inches. His eyes go wide and I immediately stop moving.

“I’m sorry,” I say, though I’m not exactly sure what I’m sorry for.

“No, no, no, don’t be sorry for anything. This is very exciting,” he says. “But if we’re going to do this now, why hold back? Just give me one moment.”

E circles around me, struggling to pull away more thick metal chains draped across my body. He rushes over to the wall, where I see him push a large button. Metallic grinding starts again but sounds much more labored this time, like something is jammed into the gears of a machine trying to revolve.

“Let me help with that,” E says as he rushes behind me. I hear him grunt before a piece of metal snaps and the grinding noise becomes much less violent. My equilibrium begins to shift again but this time I feel my entire body moved, being raised into a sitting position. “This thing worked much smoother before all your

thrashing.”

The metallic bed transforms into more of a chair. Within seconds I’m in an upright position though my body is still slightly reclined, a good thing since I’m so dizzy and off balanced that I’d probably tip over in an actual chair. My neck is weak from the dome and I open my mouth to ask why E insists that I wear it.

The words never escape my mouth. My eyes are slow to focus on what’s in front of me but when they do, my brain quickly registers the word for what I’m looking at: mirror. But it’s what I notice *in* the mirror’s reflection that’s more confusing than anything I’ve seen since waking. A reflection of some sort of metal robot-like machine. It must be somewhere between me and the mirror, blocking the view of my body, because I only see a view of my head just above it.

Something’s not right. I nearly ask about the strange robot when I realize the robot isn’t anywhere in front of me. I shake my head, watching the glass dome move side to side in the mirror. I’m terrified to think about lifting my arm but when I do, I see the reflection of the robot’s rod-like arm raise toward the ceiling. I wish my mind were still sluggish because then the enormity of the situation wouldn’t slam into me like a ton of bricks.

“No,” I whisper, the sound of my robotic voice further evidence of what I don’t want to admit, of what I can’t admit if I hope to keep my sanity. I continue to shake my head, even when I notice E stepping next to me, craning his neck to look up. He’s more than a foot shorter than me and I’m still sitting down. He must see the shock on my face within the glass dome, my blue-tinged human face sitting inexplicably atop the robot body, the rest of my human parts nowhere to be found. “No, no, no.”

“I realize this might be a shock to you, Daddy,” E says slowly. “Especially since I’m unsure about the level of artificial intelligence and robotics in the world when you were – ”

I don’t wait to hear the end of what he’s saying. The realization of what I’ve become – what I’ve been *turned into* – explodes in my mind, instantly transforming overwhelming confusion into uncontrollable anger. I leap out of the chair, my metallic feet – *robotic*

feet – pounding so hard against the floor that I hear cracking. I extend to my full height and tower above E, who puts up his hands, urging me to relax and sit back down. My instinct is to listen to him but I refuse to do that; I'm not sure I could control my body enough to sit anyway.

I wobble around like a man who's had too much to drink but somehow remain on my feet. I stumble forward, inadvertently crashing into the mirror, smashing it into thousands of tiny shards. The fact that I don't have to worry about cutting my metallic body on the glass only enrages me further. E dives out of the way as I keep staggering out of control. My glass dome finally whacks against the wall and I hear it crack, see the glass spiderweb in front of my vision.

"Please, you must calm down," E calls out. "You don't want to damage yourself."

People have to worry about hurting themselves; *things* have to worry about becoming damaged. I turn to E, enraged at what he's done to me. For a moment I control my heavy metal body and look down at the tiny man, whose entire body is covered in the same strange garbs as his head. I finally come to the realization that he is no doctor. I no longer know what to think of him but still can't consider hurting him. That doesn't mean I won't destroy something else. I raise my arm and smash it down on the twisted metal table, easily cleaving it in half. I'm surprised by my strength, my destructive ability, but discovering my raw power does nothing to calm me. I turn clumsily and find the door, stumble my way toward it. With each step I take, I feel a little more comfortable, a little steadier, a little less likely to fall flat on my face. Instinctively, I reach for the handle with my claw-like hand, which consists of five 'fingers' that look more like metallic insect pincers. I try to grab the handle but the pincers slip off, reminding me of those arcade claw machines that always wrapped around stuffed toys but never quite held on. This makes me feel like an even clumsier oaf and certainly doesn't help ease my rage. I bust through the door with ease, nearly knocking it off its hinge. The whirring is louder and faster as I move, the sound spurring me forward. I enter a hallway, the cinderblock walls plain white and

sterile-looking though it's hard to tell since everything is bathed in the dim red glow of emergency lighting. It's harder to see out here than in the last room. With E pleading behind me, I look down both ends of the hallway, neither providing an idea where to go. I choose right – for no particular reason – and stomp away.

There are no windows and very few nondescript doors. I feel trapped, nervous energy turning my anger more intense. Though I look for any sign of where I'm being held – where I've been turned into this... this *thing* – I barely pay attention to smaller details of my surroundings. I spot several cracks along the walls and ceilings – some of them pretty wide and deep – but don't give the general deterioration a second thought. The only thing that really draws my attention is a large sign in big block letters that adorns the wall. Most of the letters at the beginning have crumbled or completely fallen away but the end of the sign remains intact, even if significantly corroded: FOR PRESERVATION OF LIFE.

"Please, let me at least fix your helmet," E calls out down the hall. He rushes toward me without fear, needing to take three steps to equal the distance of one of mine. "It's not as sterile out here and I don't know the effects on your exposed skin. We can sit down and talk about what's bothering you."

"What's *bothering* me?" I yell, the robotic tone of my voice failing to exude the kind of anger I'm feeling.

I continue to stomp away before he catches up, the words from the sign already fading from my short-term memory. I stumble and crash into several walls but feel no pain, not even when I take large chunks of cinderblock with me. Just when I think the hallway might never end, a single functioning fluorescent bulb blinks just down the way, illuminating a set of doors larger than any I've passed so far. I hope this leads to an exit or at the very least somewhere important enough to give me answers.

I slip and crash to the floor ten feet in front of the doors. Standing would be difficult under the best conditions but the floor in this area is covered with water. The puddles grow bigger closer to the door. Worry finally interrupts anger long enough for me to wonder

what the hell can be in there, if maybe I should heed the warnings E continues to call from down the hallway.

“Please, just wait there, I’ll...” E calls out, pausing to catch his breath as he struggles to keep up. “I’ll help you get up.”

I want to yell that I don’t need his help but that would mean hearing the sound of my mechanical voice again. Instead, I jam both my hands into the cinderblock and pull myself up, moving so fast that I nearly pull down half the wall in the process. I take a few staggered steps along the slick floor, hoping to get the hang of it. Without thinking, I push my way through the doors, even as E calls out a final warning. “I can explain everything if you just wait,” he says. “I promise this is going to look a lot worse than it really is.”

The sound of his voice fades as the doors swing shut behind me. The first thing I notice about the new room is the sheer size of it, cavernous, amazing compared to the smaller first room and tight confines of the hallway. There’s no fear of bumping into anything in here, as the room stretches farther than I can see at ground level *and* above. The enormity is enough to make me stop in my tracks, not so easy considering my size and clumsiness as well as the slick floor. And this isn’t simply water; it’s apparently cold enough in here to have turned the floor to slush and ice.

A bluish glow emanates from countless recessed tubes built into both sides of the wall, stretching as high and far as I can see. It’s clear from the even spacing and uniformed sizing that these holes were placed here on purpose and aren’t merely evidence of this place falling to pieces. Still, I can’t imagine the builders of this place meant for so much ice to cover the floor, or for so much water to drip from an unseen source above, or for several of the blue holes to be dimmer and emitting steam. I can’t *feel* how cold it is but within seconds of standing still and looking around, frost begins to creep across the cracked glass of my dome helmet, making it harder for me to see. I try to wipe away the spreading condensation but my pincer-like fingers smack hard against the glass and make the cracks worse.

No exits are in sight, nor are there any windows. I’ve never been in such a cavernous space and felt so claustrophobic. I’m sure my

racing nerves and this damn helmet don't help with that. Still, there has to be a way out of here. I can't see the far end of the room, which is heavily steamed, but it must lead somewhere. I take a few careful steps in that direction, growing more anxious as I approach the foggy area. I glance into each hole I pass and see the same metal, frost-covered tubing in each one. Curiosity kicks in and I'm half-tempted to search one of the tubes to see what's inside, to see what needs to be stored in such frigid conditions. But as I approach the nearest glowing hole in the wall, something stops me from getting too close, an invisible hand of warning and not just the frost spreading quicker over my glass dome. I have a bad feeling I don't want to know what's in there.

I push ahead, hoping the severe cold won't affect my circuitry or cogs or whatever the hell I'm made out of. The silence in the room is eerie, only my whirring and clicking footsteps echoing louder than the hissing steam somewhere in front of me. I'm actually relieved to hear E's voice echoing from behind.

"Please come back, Daddy," he calls out. "At least stop, let me clean up and explain. I wasn't expecting anyone to be taking a tour."

I'm about to ask what he needs to clean up but when I try to stop moving, my weight and momentum take over. I slide across the icy floor, my robotic limbs flailing all over the place, desperately trying to maintain a fragile balance. I must resemble a baby giraffe walking across an icy pond. Just when it seems I might remain upright, the robotic feet slip out from under me and I crash down, cracking the ice and more of my helmet.

The glass shatters, clattering on the floor as I skid along the ice. Without the dome, my face finally feels the tingle of cold. I imagine it would sting my lungs to breathe this air but that's only a guess since I no longer have the ability to take a breath. I end up crashing into another metal table, this one lost in clouds of steam. Not only do I knock it over, but whatever was sitting atop clatters to the floor. Several parts of the large object break and scatter, not to mention a folder full of papers that flutters down. But the new mess is hardly noticeable among the rest of the junk strewn about. No wonder E was

so concerned with cleaning up around here; if the ice hadn't tripped me up, I'm sure this other junk on the floor –

I stop cold and stare at the nearest object, something that's staring back at me, unblinking. If I still had a heart, it would either be pounding on overdrive or stopped altogether. I don't need to look at the rest of the junk to know they're frozen body parts – arms, legs, feet, torsos – nor do I have to look at what fell off the metal table to realize it was an entire frozen body that smashed apart. This realization hits me suddenly, though it doesn't take a genius to figure out since I'm staring directly into the eyes of a frozen human head.

CHAPTER FOUR

The worst part – as if my day could *get* any worse – is that this severed head isn't the only one on the floor; the body I knocked over isn't the only one that contributes to the mess of frozen flesh laying everywhere. And considering E's earlier warning about the need to clean up, it's obvious who's responsible for causing this icy carnage.

A piece of paper flutters to a stop next to the head and finally gets me to look away. It's some kind of medical chart with a photograph attached. The photo is of an attractive middle-aged woman with blond hair and dazzlingly blue eyes. The color of her eyes is the only thing that makes me consider connecting the dots between the picture and the head. The dead woman's skin is now as blue as her eyes, her mouth agape in fear, her hair brittle and broken. It's undeniably her but I still struggle to believe that she could be the same person.

I don't want to look at any more of the human remains. I'm not sure I can still sleep or dream but I don't need to give myself more ammo for future nightmares. I try to stand but fall several more times before eventually scrambling to my feet. I want to get the hell out of here but this part of the room is too foggy to see clearly and I can't take the risk of stomping on any more icy bodies. So even though E is the last person I want to see, I follow the sound of his voice until I end up back in the section where the floors are clear of frosty corpses.

E stands there, on his feet but doubled over at the waist, his breathing coming in deep gasping gurgles.

"Did you do this to them?" I ask angrily.

E stands up straighter, his eyes widening with fear. He takes a careful step back and holds up his hands to calm me down. It doesn't work.

"It's not what you think," he says. "Come with me, let me fit you with a new dome and I'll explain."

I shake my head, the motion causing me to wobble on the ice. E reaches out to help steady me but I'd rather fall than accept his hand. Somehow I manage to stay balanced.

“How can I possibly trust you? Especially after what you did to all those people,” I say.

The spot on his nose between the eye sockets creases. I’ve clearly offended him, which shouldn’t matter but for some reason leaves me with a pang of guilt.

“I was trying to *help* them, to save their lives,” E says, his voice laden with dignified annoyance, as if I have no right to question what’s going on here. “If I wanted you hurt, don’t you think it would’ve happened already? I thought you’d understand considering everything I’ve done to help you.”

“*Help* me? You turned me into a ro...” I stop, unable to finish *that* word. “Into *this*!”

E’s eyes narrow and he points to the floor defiantly.

“You’d prefer to be like them?”

Reluctantly, I look down at the frozen body parts and wonder what my icy head would look like beside them. Horrific things seem to be happening in this place – especially if my outcome is considered positive – but I don’t suppose death is better than becoming a ro... becoming what I now am. I back away from the carnage and my feet hit another slippery patch. I begin to lose my footing again but E jumps in – regardless of our size difference – and somehow helps me stay on my feet.

“I’ll see if there’s something I can do to improve your balance, maybe harvest sturdier feet from the scrap pile,” E says.

I don’t like the sound of being assembled from scrap heaps but pointing that out won’t help anything. Instead, I obey E’s request to follow him out of the frozen room. He leads me back through the hallway, where awkward silence hangs heavy between us. The idea of smashing my way to answers no longer seems feasible so I’m embarrassed into silence despite all the questions I have. After what I’ve just seen, it’s probably better to sit back and wait for the whole story instead of trying to piece it together myself. Answers should come in time, though I’m not sure how much I want to learn anymore.

We head back toward the sterile room, stopping at one of the unmarked doors along the way. I wonder what’s behind the other

doors but I don't ask and E doesn't offer that information.

"Think there should be some good stuff left if I search a little longer," E says as he opens the door. "Guess you could say I was in a bit of a hurry picking this stuff out when I saw that you'd survived."

At first, I think the room is a storage area for garbage; so much twisted metal is strewn about that I barely see the floor. Though E's robes reach beyond his feet, he has no trouble climbing atop and over and through all the junk. It's not until he pulls out his laser tool and starts going to town on a heap of metallic debris that I realize this isn't merely garbage. They're bodies, a realization that hits me nearly as hard as discovering the frozen corpses in the massive back room. But these bodies once belonged to robots.

Normally I'd feel nothing at the sight of so many deactivated – or in other cases, destroyed – machines. But recalling the image of myself in the mirror obviously gives me a different outlook. I stare more closely at the robots, notice that they're of various designs and sizes. More importantly, I don't spot any other fusion of human parts and robotic.

"I think these may work better for balance," E calls out across the room, holding up a pair of metallic feet in triumph. The cavalier way he brandishes robot parts makes me wary about his concern for me, if he thinks of me as just another robot now. But considering the frozen bodies strewn about the other room, I guess E doesn't have an abundance of compassion for *any* type of being.

"What happened to them all?" I ask.

E climbs back over the debris and stops in front of me. He gasps for breath, winded from the climb, the gurgling sound at the back of his throat more pronounced with fatigue. He's much more interested in the parts he's just harvested; he kneels by my legs and starts to inspect his handiwork before considering my question.

"I destroyed them."

E compares the new parts with what's already installed on me; he holds the feet next to mine the way a tailor might try to guess the size of a groom's tuxedo. I look from the tiny man to the stacks of discarded robots, of which there must be several dozen. I can't

imagine him slowing down a robot let alone destroying one, but the nonchalant way he answers the questions leads me to believe he's telling the truth.

"How?" I ask incredulously.

E finally looks up from the parts and sees me staring at the robots. He shrugs before starting to search the piles for the second replacement part. It doesn't take him long to find what he needs.

"I exploited their weaknesses. I *should* know how, after all," he adds cryptically. It sounds like there's a lot more to *that* story but he doesn't continue to tell it. "Come on, we have plenty of time for tales. I want to get you fixed up so you don't take any more spills."

E sounds genuinely concerned, leaving me more confused about what to think of him. He hands me the robotic feet – which I clumsily clutch onto – while he carries the more delicate glass. He leads me back down the hallway. Now that my emotions have calmed, I try to look for more evidence of where I'm at but the busted sign is still the only clue. PRESERVATION OF LIFE stares back at me as I pass it and I feel a stirring in my memory, my brain trying to make some sort of connection. For some reason the acronym of POL stands out but I'm not sure why. Upon closer inspection of the wall, I see the faded outline of other letters that have fallen off. It's only a few letters at first but my brain registers enough to put together one of the other words no longer intact: INSTITUTE.

"Everything okay? You don't feel off balance again, do you?" E asks from down the hallway. I hadn't realized I stopped to stare at the sign. I shake my head and continue to follow.

Once back in the sterile room, the floor crunches beneath our feet as we walk across the broken mirror glass. The room is a wreck, strewn with glass and rubble and crushed pieces of metal table. I'm embarrassed that I caused such a mess. I don't remember my former life but I have a deep-seeded feeling that I wasn't a confrontational or violent person.

"Sorry," I say, the mechanical tone to my voice making the apology sound insincere.

E waves away the apology and starts trying to move the

destroyed metal table. He grunts with the effort, barely shifting it a few inches. The table must be very heavy, which makes me feel worse for destroying it. E quickly tires and leans against it for support, trying to catch his breath. I still know so little about him but this isn't the first time I've seen him struggle physically. I suddenly wonder how old or frail the man is under those robes.

I put the robot parts down – my new feet – and approach the table.

“Let me help,” I say.

E looks up at me and nods. I mean for us both to drag the table away but E steps back to let me push alone. I may have quickly gotten proficient in walking but this kind of fine motor skill is much more intimidating. I silently tell my arms to rise toward the broken table, I clamp my fingers around the twisted metal. I don't know my own strength and end up crunching the metal even tighter in my grip. I push the heavy table, hoping to budge it a few inches. Instead, the table soars across the room and smashes into the wall, crushing it even further while causing tiny pieces of debris to crumble off the wall and ceiling.

“Sorry,” I say again.

E shakes his head; the smile has returned to his eyes.

“Nonsense,” he says. “Your model was designed to be faster and stronger than any other. I'm glad to see the robot didn't suffer when I put your head on it.” He begins to walk out of the room when he stops. “And it should make rearranging the furniture much easier around here, yes?”

He laughs, hyena-like and slightly crazed, the effort launching him into a coughing fit. I should probably go with him, see if he needs help with whatever he's getting, but I don't mind having a moment to myself. I hold up my robotic arms and study myself closer, drink in the details of my metallic skeleton, thick plates covering my gears or circuits or wires or whatever comprises a robot. Looking down at my torso is much more difficult. I can't move my head forward enough to see much. I suddenly wish I hadn't busted that mirror. I see that most of my chest area is made up of smaller plates that are dark-blue and

reflective. They're outlined in metal but appear quite fragile, unlike the rest of my frame. When I stand beneath the room's bright bulb, I actually feel my body absorbing the light, gaining strength. I'm not sure whether to like this feeling or be worried about it.

Moments later, E wheels in a gurney and positions it under the light. He pats it and motions me over.

"It might not be as big as the surgical table but it should do the trick," he says.

I step forward apprehensively and clumsily sit atop the gurney. It begins to roll the moment I touch it but E holds it steady. When I lay down, I feel the gurney begin to sag, its metallic frame creaking in protest. But it holds my weight and E grabs the glass dome he took off one of the destroyed robots. I feel like we're back to where we began, the shadow of his movements crossing in front of my eyes as he works behind my head. He carefully removes the broken glass that remains from my first dome before fitting me with the new one. I feel a strange pulling sensation at the back of my head; parts of my face twitch involuntarily.

"Sorry about that, just have to maneuver some of these wires to fit inside the dome," E explains. "This one is a little smaller than the other."

E fits the dome over my head and when it doesn't quite fit, he pushes it down roughly. The way he lacks a delicate touch makes me certain he's no doctor. He reminds me of a mechanic yanking at parts of a car, though I guess I'm no longer so different from a car. I don't have a wealth of medical options at this point so I remain quiet and let him concentrate, especially as he works around my head. Several sparks fly and I can't help but flinch. The gurney bows again and I nearly slide off.

"Don't worry, I'm done here," he says, his voice again muffled by the glass partition separating us. He shuffles around to my feet. "This shouldn't hurt, at least I don't think. Honestly that's just an assumption; I've been wrong about a lot of things during this process. If you feel anything, let me know. Just make sure you don't kick – I don't think the table or I could survive that."

I sit up enough to see him using the laser tool down by my feet. It's not long before he pulls one off and tosses it aside. The sensation is strange; not exactly painful but something I can definitely sense. It's like wearing a hat for so long that you get used to the feeling of having it on, only to pull it off and feel like something isn't where it should be. A shiver runs down my spine, or at least that's what my brain convinces me (though I know damn well that my spine no longer exists). I can't take the silence any longer, can't sit here quietly and watch him disassemble parts of me. I blurt out the first thing that pops in my mind.

"ENG-1023? That's not a normal name, is it?"

E stops working and looks up, surprised.

"Is Daddy a normal name?" he snaps back.

"I guess not," I admit. "Actually, I'm starting to get the feeling that isn't my real name. I think only one person might've called me that."

"Makes sense," E says.

"I still can't remember my name," I say.

E nods. "I would guess not. At least you *had* a normal name at one point. Like you said, ENG-1023 isn't a regular name, it's a designation number. Where I came from, that's how we were labeled to help distinguish us from one another."

"Where was that?" I ask. "Where you were from, I mean."

If I can learn more about E's past, I might be able to learn more about a world where human/robot hybrids exist. I might not remember much about my previous existence, but I don't think that was ever normal for me. E looks up from his work, the corners of his eyes creased again.

"I'm sorry," I say. Apologizing seems to be what I'm best at now. I'm not so sure I should be distracting him, whether he's merely working on my feet or not.

E shakes his head. "It's okay. I've never been asked anything about myself before and I haven't had anyone to talk to in a long time. You'll have to forgive my social awkwardness. If you really want to know, I come from Robotropolis."

“Like... an entire city of robots?” I ask in awe.

“Well, not a city the way you’d remember them,” E says.

He proceeds to tell me his life story, never once taking his eyes off the new parts he attaches to me. For someone not used to discussing himself – or in general – he talks for a long time, barely pausing to catch his breath, weaving a tale that’s more incredible than any story I’ve probably ever heard.